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SUMMER HOLIDAY  
JOANNA GODDEN MARRIED  
FAITHFUL STRANGER

# THE LARDNERS AND THE LAURELWOODS

A NOVEL

BY

Sheila Kaye-Smith

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1947

## THE LARDNERS AND THE LAURELWOODS

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FIRST EDITION

G-W

# The Lardners and the Laurelwoods



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## PRELUDE

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SUCH A RAILWAY, THOUGHT MARTIN, SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO exist in the present stage of our civilization. He had been sitting for nearly an hour on a hard, springless seat, but he had not traveled more than twenty miles; and it was impossible to read, because there was no light in the carriage. There had been no light in the old days, he remembered; the railway had no tunnels and it had not been thought necessary to provide lamps to dispel merely natural darkness.

But surely things might have moved a bit since then. From what he could see of it, this carriage had been in use unchanged for thirty or forty years. He might even have traveled in it on some earlier occasion. They might all have crowded in here, he, Diana, Meg, Father, Mother, Boy and Nanny Wheeler, laughing, chattering, pushing, scuffling, taking up the whole compartment with their parcels and hand luggage.

It was a strange thought that in those days the high spot of the journey had been their change from the comfortable, conventional, punctual South Eastern Railway to the little wooden train with its ridiculous humpbacked engine that jolted and shunted them across the marsh from Flattenden into the Weald. The holiday longed for and planned for throughout so many London weeks seemed really to begin when the guard came swinging along the footboard and in at the carriage door to take their tickets. "Five and two

halves to Rushmonden," as earlier it had been "Four and three halves," and even, he could just remember, "three and three halves," in the days when Meg was the baby, before Boy was born.

Another high spot had been the first glimpse of Idolsfold. It was visible from the train, he remembered, shortly after Potcommon. You could see it standing high on the ridge above Shirley Moor, with its barns and oasthouses beside it and the trees of Boldshaves Wood behind. There had always been a great fuss about who should see it first: "I can see Idolsfold, I can see the house," and Mother saying that last time, "Martin dear, it would be unselfish to let Boy see it first, as he's too little to look out of the window like you."

He had let Boy see it, he remembered, but he could also remember how angry he had felt with Boy, and with Mother too. It hurt him now to think he had been angry with Mother, who had meant well even when she said those silly, unfair things that irritated him. And Boy, too, poor little wretch, had not been really to blame for thinking his superior quickness and powers of observation had revealed the place to him before anyone else. But he could still feel some of the crossness and sullenness with which he had finished that journey.

It was queer how places seemed to hold and keep the emotions which had charged them. Even now he could feel the necessity of that view of Idolsfold from the bend beyond Potcommon. They must be near it, for he could see the meadow-hills of the Isle of Oxney and the Isle of Ebony part to allow the tide of marshland to creep between them. That marsh was Shirley Moór—a ridiculous name for a marsh, he had always thought. The twilight struck up sharp and silver from the straight sword of the Reading Sewer, and beyond it was the ridge where the roofs of Copstreet stood outlined against a sky like a black pearl. There was still enough light to show him Idolsfold if he cared to look for it.

He stood up and opened the window. He had the carriage to himself—that was one of the few advantages that this foolish railway could show over the main system. At the junction only a handful of people had sprinkled themselves into the solitary coach that the engine was just about to pull away into a gray gleaming land of dusk and water. There had been three halts since then, and now he believed that the train was empty except for himself. Clutching his hat to his head in the slip stream, he looked out. Great sheets of floodwater struck up more light into the sky, and there



on the hill above them, looking down as into a lake, unmistakably stood Idolsfold.

He could see the redness of the walls as the only color left in a world of whites, duns, and grays. The front of the house seemed still full of heat and sunshine, a little day left glowing on the hillside. He could see too the windows alight, though he could not be sure whether the light came from without or from within. At that distance it would be impossible to distinguish any changes that had been made. The broad bulk of the place stood as it had always stood, the dwelling house with the oasts to southward and the great sprawl-roofed barn to the north. The windows seemed no larger than of old, and the "new part" still showed hard and trim against the shambling outlines of the "old part." Perhaps there were fewer trees, but behind it still piled the shadows of Boldshaves Wood. He felt a ridiculous impulse to cry: I see Idolsfold!

Rushmonden was not the terminus of the Kentish Border Railway, but it broke the system in two. No train ever went through it, though they started from it in both directions—north to Meadmerry and the London, Chatham and Dover line, south to Flat-tenden and the South Eastern. The train from Flattenden was nearly always late. It shunted and picked up trucks at all the little stations, so that no time of arrival could be accurately predicted. Certainly that on the timetable was no more than a wild guess.

Bess Hovenden, however, had arrived early, for she knew that the train was capable of arriving early too, should there be no goods to shunt at Bibleham, Potcommon or Drungewick Road. She folded her hands upon the wheel and settled herself to wait. She did not mind waiting, but she hoped the train would not be too late, because there was supper for them all to prepare at home. They would be a houseful tonight, quite like those old times she could only half remember. All the Laurelwoods would be there, except the two who were kept away, one in his coffin, the other in the Persian mountains. There were the grandchildren, too, and Nanny Wheeler, to say nothing of the hospital nurse. How pleased Mother and Dad would have been to see them all—more pleased than their daughter; though of course, poor souls, you could not grudge them houseroom when their mother was so ill—dying, Dr. Freethorn had once thought.

The dusk was settling on the town behind her. Turning in her seat she could see the dark lumps of the houses riddled with lights

against the still burnished sky. The train must now be some ten minutes overdue. She grumbled to herself—it was a big slice out of her time, this train meeting. But it was interesting to see the family arrive after guessing what they would be like after all these years. How many was it exactly? Their last visit had been in 1912; that made it twenty-four—long enough for everybody to have become completely unrecognizable, including herself. Both Diana and Meg had said they would not have recognized her. She thought she would have known Diana; after all, she had been grown up that last visit, though still only a girl. But Meg, who was her own age and had been her special friend—you saw nothing of her in the quiet, plain, smart, rather frightening woman who had been the first of them to come down.

She wondered if she would recognize Martin; he had been fourteen when she saw him last. Most likely he would have changed a lot; grown stout, perhaps—men did at around forty. George was growing stout, though heaven knew he worked hard enough and ate no more than anybody else. He had wanted to come to the station instead of her this time, but she would not let him, because he had just as much to do as she had and was not really interested in the Laurelwoods. He was not a Lardner so the Laurelwoods could not mean to him what they meant to his wife.

The distant hoot of a train broke into the silence. There it was at last—at the level crossing by Castweasel. In a moment it would be here.

She had decided to stay in the car rather than quest for an unknown man on the inadequately lighted platform. Tom Swaffer was there to give him a hand with his bag, though, come to think of it, he was not likely to have brought much with him. He would not come prepared for a long visit; perhaps when he heard his mother was so much better he would go away again tomorrow—his sisters said he was a busy man. He would not stay at Idolsfold longer than he was obliged, even though his own children were there as well as his sisters and his mother.

A series of clanks and rumbles brought the train into the station. Then came the engine's long sigh, and the banging of carriage doors. All the passengers would get out here, but she was not afraid of missing Martin in a crowd. Seldom did this last train arrive with more than a few survivors, whom she would probably know by sight. Here he came almost at once; this must be he, for Tom Swaffer was with him, carrying his bag. But he did not look in the

least like anything she had expected or imagined. Martin in the old days had been a leggy, rangy boy, too tall for his age, growing too fast. This seemed to be a little man, a little fussy man, judging by his voice. She could hear him fussing at Tom Swaffer: "Where are the taxis? I'm expecting a taxi to meet me. I ordered a taxi."

Tom, of course, knew the Idolsfold car and made straight for it as Bess climbed out and opened the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Laurelwood. I think you'd better put your bag on the back seat and sit in front with me. It's a bit draughty behind."

Martin, those spectacles seemed to be the only connection between his past and present selves, snatched off his hat and looked bewildered. He obviously did not know who she was.

"I'm Mrs. Hovenden—I expect you remember me as Bess."

"Oh, yes, of course. I beg your pardon. But I was looking for a taxi—I asked my sister on the phone to order a taxi to meet me."

"It's rather difficult round here to get a taxi, especially after dark. There's only one in Rushmonden and none in Copstreet, so we thought it best to meet you ourselves."

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm much obliged."

He turned up his coat collar, however, in protest at the open car.

"Your mother was very much better when I left. The doctor says now that she'll pull through."

She was answering a question that he ought to have asked instead of fussing about taxis.

"Indeed? I'm very glad to hear that, very glad to hear it."

Of course he was. What a funny way to speak. She had not liked him very much in the old days, but chiefly because he wasn't interested in her—she was too young. Now it seemed as if he had been nicer as a boy than he was as a man, more kind, more natural. But perhaps he was shy, or tired. She could see him looking round him as they drove out of the station yard—he might be trying to call the town out of the darkness and the past years.

"I don't think you'll find it much changed," she said, "when you see it in daylight."

"Not been much building?"

"Only toward Haffenden. Sir Charles Mallender never would sell any land for building, nor will Sir Humphrey, though he's so hard up."

"Hard up, is he? How's that? I was only a boy, of course, when we knew them, but I always thought they were as rich as Croesus."

"I daresay they were once, but Sir Charles was a racing man, you'll remember, and I believe he lost a packet before he died. Then of course there were all the death duties. Anyway they've let the Hall now and live in what used to be the agent's house."

Martin muttered something about its being a common story nowadays. He was leaning forward in his seat, peering through the windshield, and it occurred to her that he mistrusted her driving; he was just the sort of man to be afraid of being driven by a woman.

"It's all right," she said tartly. "I've driven this road hundreds of times in the dark."

He seemed anxious not to offend her and began to talk again.

"In the old days we always had a sort of wagonette to meet us."

"Yes, Dad didn't buy a car till a year before he died. This one's nearly as old as that." She laughed ruefully.

"Your sister Emmy—didn't she marry a man in the car trade? Or bicycle trade no doubt it was then."

"That's right—Ted Arboys. He had a bicycle shop in Rushmonden. Then he opened a garage in Shadoxhurst. They're there still."

"Any family?"

"Yes. Three boys and a girl. Clarence is married too, you know, and he has a family of five."

"My mother told me he's left Idolsfold."

"Yes, he runs a haulier's business over at Maidstone. Dad left the place to him and Dick, but Clarence didn't care much for farming, so when he married he sold his share to Mr. Hovenden."

"And Dick lives with you, I understand?"

"That's right."

"He never married?"

"No."

She would not tell him any more. Let him find out for himself about poor Dick.

In the snugly curtained sitting room the ceiling light was so brilliant that Meg took off and wiped her horn-rimmed glasses.

"I wonder if we can persuade Bess Hovenden to change this bulb for a lower-powered one. I get quite dazzled when I try to read."

"In the old days," said Diana, "we used to have lamps."

"So I remember; and candles in the bedrooms. They fascinated me—they wouldn't now."

Diana strolled across the room to the fireplace, where a fire

burned almost as brightly as the light. Her first automatic reaction to the sight of her own face in the mirror over it was to smile, but immediately her smile faded and she shook her head.

"Lamps and candles gave a much more becoming light."

"I grant you that. But you can get almost the same effect with electricity if you choose the right fittings. It's this hideous shade—reflector, rather—that makes the trouble."

"The furniture's hideous too."

Meg looked round her critically.

"Yes—Edwardian armchairs with neo-Georgian covers, a late Victorian sideboard and one or two antique fakes. Was it as bad as this in the old days?"

Diana, who was putting on powder and lipstick, did not answer for a moment.

"Oh, I expect it was, all except the fakes. I seem to remember a lot of wickerware. But that sideboard was here. We used to have our meals in this room, you know."

"Yes, I can remember that much. What a labor it must have been, carrying everything in from the kitchen. I'm not surprised that Bess has moved the lodgers to a more convenient dining room."

"Not lodgers—she'd never stand for that. Paying guests are what we are now."

Meg shuddered.

"I'm afraid so. Poor Bess! I've tried in vain to find in her a single vestige of the little girl who used to be my heroine."

"How old were you when we gave up coming?"

"Only nine, and she was either a year older or a year younger. I forget which."

Diana, having settled her face, sat down and looked into the fire.

"Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why we suddenly stopped coming here?"

"I don't know that it has. You see I was so very young when Father and Mother decided to take us to Scotland instead. I remember being dreadfully upset about it and howling a lot, but it was just one of the beastly things that grownups did to one—as causeless and unreasonable as the weather."

"I can remember your howling. I, on the other hand, was delighted."

"You'd just got engaged, hadn't you? If I ever thought about the business at all I put it down to that. We went to Scotland because the Frenches went."

"But I could have gone without you, if Father and Mother had

still wanted to come here. And it seems odd now that they didn't let me go with Pamela and Mrs. French instead of dragging the whole lot of us up there, including Boy and Nanny Wheeler. After all, Mother had been coming to Idolsfold every year since she was fifteen, and Father ever since he was born; and his father and mother before him for goodness knows how long. Two generations of Laurelwoods. I can't help thinking that something must have happened to bring the whole thing suddenly to an end like that."

"The most likely thing I can think of," said Meg, "is that after all those years they got bored and thought they would like a change."

Diana shook her head.

"No, I'm sure it wasn't that. Mother always adored this place, and the people too. I can remember her pitching into me that very last summer because I got superior about it all. She said I was getting spoiled. And no one could have been more delighted than she was to come back again. I know, for I was with her when she saw that advertisement in the *Telegraph*."

"Perhaps it was Father who got fed up."

"I wonder. I always had an idea that she liked it more than he did, though she was only a Laurelwood by marriage. She worshiped the Lardners, and now she seems to be starting it all over again with Martin's children."

Meg looked at her watch.

"He ought to be here by now."

"No doubt the train's late. That used to be one of its great attractions in the past."

"Bess Hovenden must be tired of waiting at the station. I really think he might have come down by the same train as I did."

"Well, I'd told him Mother was better, but of course he knew it was a heart attack. He ought to have come at once. But he's always trying to make us think he's too busy to eat or sleep."

"It's Bess I'm thinking of. She has quite enough to do without meeting three separate trains. By the way, have you seen Dick?"

Diana stood up again and looked at herself in the glass. She passed her powder puff over her face.

"Dick Lardner?"

"Yes. I've seen him, and he looks terrible."

"Terrible! How? In what way?"

"Old—quite old, though he can't be much over forty. I'm sure he drinks. His hand shakes and you may have noticed that the Hovendens are very reticent and self-conscious about him."

"I wonder why he hasn't married."

"Well, who would have him if he drinks?"

Diana sat down and poked the fire.

"He was eighteen when we last came. I wonder how long he's been drinking."

"I hardly remember him, though Bess used to be very fond of him, as I gather she still is, poor thing. He was too old to take any notice of me. Wasn't he Martin's pal?"

"Yes—he and the other brother Clarence, who doesn't live here any more. They were always going about together, till Father and Mother got worried and tried to put a stop to it."

"Why did they do that?"

"Because they didn't want Martin to be a farmer."

Meg laughed.

"Martin a farmer! What a picture!"

"But he did want to be a farmer at one time—he used to say so quite openly, and they were afraid he really would."

"You amaze me. I simply can't imagine Martin taking any interest in farming apart from leases and mortgages and conveyances and such like. But how's this, Diana? Do you think *that* was the reason we stopped coming here?"

"You mean because of Martin?"

"Yes, Martin and all of us. Father and Mother were great sticklers for class, and perhaps they thought we were getting too matey with the Lardners. I'm sure they were never friendly with *their* generation, and they probably didn't approve of the terms we were on with ours."

Diana stiffened.

"I don't remember being on terms, as you call it, with any of them. There was a time when I liked to talk to Emmy, but I don't think Father and Mother can have objected to that."

"I wasn't thinking of you—you always were a perfect lady. But I can remember a great row there was that summer over Bess and me swopping our toys, and if Martin gave trouble too—Oh, there he is! At last!"

The Chrysler car which put Idolsfold on the roads could be heard squealing its halt at the garden gate. Both Diana and Meg went into the hall, but did not draw aside the heavy curtain that muffled the front door. They heard footsteps on the brick path, then the door opened and the curtain heaved.

"I can't see what I'm doing, hang it all. Why on earth . . ."

He was in the little hallway carved out of the ancient living room of the place. The curtain had knocked his hat off and buried it in its folds.

"Where's my hat? Oh, thanks, Meg. Shall I leave my bag here?"

He kissed both his sisters rather reluctantly—Diana because he was afraid of her make-up coming off on his face, Meg because she had married a communist.

Bess Hovenden drove the car round to the lodge that sheltered it at nights, and then went into the house by the back door. The kitchen was in the old part of the house, which was much larger than the new. A ramble of low-ceilinged rooms lay between it and the guests' sitting room. None had any apparently distinctive function, and all were on different levels, so that innumerable steps waited to trip the unwary. It seemed incredible that in the old days every single meal the Laurelwoods ate had been carried up and down and through them. George had grumbled when Bess had changed the little outer kitchen where the family used to eat into a guests' dining room. But he had agreed with her that it was really impossible to feed people at such a distance from the cooking stove.

No doubt it hadn't been so bad in those old times when Mother and Emmy and a girl had all been there to carry the dishes—to say nothing of herself, helping them lay the table, though only a little thing, mixing the mustard for them—she could remember doing that, arranging knives and forks, polishing glasses. Pity she hadn't brought up June to be useful. But then she hadn't thought they would ever be having summer visitors again. Dad and Mother had never let the rooms to anyone after the Laurelwoods gave up coming. Mother had said she had no heart for it and didn't want strangers after having had the same family for so long. Then when Joe was killed at Ypres, his Elizabeth had come to live at the place with her children and there hadn't been room for visitors; and when they had gone, and Dad and Mother were dead, and she and George were living at Idolsfold with poor Dick, they simply couldn't be bothered to let the new part, nor was there any need for it. It was not till the bad times came in 1930 that she had remembered how Dad had always said it helped to let rooms in summer. Not only did the visitors pay well, but they bought a lot of stuff off the place and hired the horse and trap continually at half a crown an hour; in fact they made in proportion as much difference to his income as hop-picking did to poorer families—she remembered him saying that.



George hadn't liked the idea; he had thought it a comedown. If only Granny Lardner had been there to tell him off! So she had called the lodgers paying guests when she advertised. But they had lived away from the family in the new part just the same and had their meals separately, though she had moved their dining room to the outer kitchen. She had done it up with some old stuff bought at Clearhedge Farm sale—a gate-legged table and some old chairs and one of those warming pans that London people liked to see about. Her first guests had all come from London, and when they went away had asked as a great favor if they might buy the warming pan. She had let them have it for four pounds—three pounds, five shillings more than it had cost her, since they were so silly—and after that she had always kept a warming pan or an old stool or a copper jug or two on the strength of somebody wanting to buy them. The paying guests were a great help to her finances, and no more trouble than the old-fashioned lodgers used to be.

Then only two months ago had come that letter from Mrs. Laurelwood. She had written rather stiffly at first, not knowing that the Mrs. Hovenden in the advertisement was the little Bess Lardner she had known as a child. But when Bess had answered and told her who she was she had written again in a much more friendly style. She had been living at Tunbridge Wells, she said, ever since Mr. Laurelwood's death, eight years ago. In the old days, Bess remembered, the family used to live in London. But before that—when the first generation of Lardners had welcomed the first generation of Laurelwoods—they had lived in Folkestone; and even in Bess's time they used to visit Folkestone every year. She herself had gone with them twice, but after that terrible business of the baby doll she had not been allowed to go . . . funny, how clearly she had remembered all that as she read Mrs. Laurelwood's letter, though she hadn't given it a thought for over twenty years.

Mrs. Laurelwood said she was in charge of her son's boy and girl—did Mrs. Hovenden remember her son Martin?—she was looking for some nice country place to take them after a trying winter of coughs and colds. They would not be any trouble, as she still had her old nurse with her to look after them; and she liked the thought of their coming to the farm and finding all the health and pleasure there that her own children had found.

So a fourth generation of Laurelwoods had arrived at Idolsfold, accompanied by vestiges of the second—actual in old Mrs. Laurelwood, honorary in Nanny Wheeler. Only the third had been missing, and now that too was here. Three unrecognizable people who

had once been Diana, Meg and Martin Laurelwood, were now in the visitors' sitting room. One other whom Bess could remember only as a rather tiresome little boy was far away in Iran.

"Well," asked George as she came in, "collected all your party?"

"Yes, thank heaven, that's the lot."

"And how soon will you have to take them all back to the station?"

"Monday, I suppose. Diana said that she and Meg wouldn't stay beyond Monday, now that Mrs. Laurelwood's so much better. But Martin's so busy he may be off tomorrow."

George took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at her ruminatively.

"Is that what you call them when you speak to them: Martin, Meg and Diana?"

Bess laughed.

"No. I reckon the time for that's over; and I remember that Mother never liked it, nor did Nanny Wheeler. She'd always pull me up sharp when I said 'Meg.' It ought to have been Miss Meg, according to her, though she didn't call her Miss herself, and of course I didn't when she or Mother were not about."

"And does she make June and Arthur call Tim and Angela Master and Miss?"

"No, I don't think she does. She's lost her bite, poor old Nanny Wheeler—her bark, I should say, for it was never worse than that. By the way, where are June and Arthur now?"

"In the west room, I think, doing their homework."

"Well, they must come and finish it in here. I don't want all their mess lying about when the family comes through to supper."

George grinned.

"You talk quite like your mother. I remember the way she used to say 'the Family.'"

The new part at Idolsfold was a courtesy title. It was new only by contrast with the rest of the house. Probably the prosperous days before Waterloo had seen it built, though the exact date could not be certain, because the style was traditional and no Lardners had been in occupation then. It consisted of a gable and a small connecting wing, containing between them some half-dozen odd-sized rooms on two floors joined by a curiously light, white and graceful staircase. Throughout it the ceilings were higher than in the old part, and the windows were all sash windows. The bow in

the sitting room was not, however, contemporary, but a clumsy Victorian afterthought.

Over the sitting room was the largest bedroom, which in the old days had always been the nursery. It was the nursery now, for Mrs. Laurelwood still believed as she had believed then that the children should have the best accommodation. "I always tell the children they're lucky, they've got the best room in the house. It isn't every father and mother who'd give up the best room to their children," she used to say to children panting to occupy the smaller, more sinisterly attractive rooms in the wing. Doubtless she had said the same to Martin's children before she took for herself the back room in the gable, where she and Mr. Laurelwood had slept every summer for nineteen years.

The present party had overflowed the normal visitors' accommodation. The hospital nurse occupied the high strip of a room where Diana had slept after she became too old for the night nursery, and the little box with two fascinating cupboards nearly as big as itself, which used to be known as "Martin's room," had five years ago been equipped as a bathroom, though the hot water, by the time it reached it, had generally lost the gentle glow in which it had left the kitchen boiler. Meg and Diana both had to be accommodated in the old part, and Martin found, to his annoyance, that he was to occupy the little back room on the ground floor which had been his parents' sitting room in the days when the present sitting room was used for the family meals. The rest of the Laurelwoods had had then, as his children had now, the larger back room to play in.

"Appalling draught," he grumbled. "Comes straight down the hall from the front door. I shall be frozen."

"You can have a fire in here," said Diana, "which is more than you could have had upstairs. There won't be any difficulty about that, as the grate burns wood."

"In which case I shall probably be asphyxiated as well as frozen. But it doesn't matter. I shan't stop more than the night."

"Oh, you must stop over the week end. Mother's counting on us all for that."

"I don't see how I possibly can. You've no idea what we've got to get through at the office."

"But surely not on the week end. You really must stay, Martin, or Mother will be dreadfully upset."

Martin groaned.

"None of you seem to realize that I run the business on which her comfort depends—to say nothing of the children's and certain additions to the comfort of you girls. I'm the only member of my firm left in operation, and I find it impossible to get competent office staff."

"You should get a partner."

"That's easy to say, but not so easy to do. Besides, if I did it wouldn't make any real difference. Ours is an old confidential family business, and our clients wouldn't care to put their affairs in the hands of a stranger. All the work would still come on me."

Diana looked at her watch.

"Well, if you're going to see the children at all tonight you'd better go at once. It's time they were asleep."

"Oh, stop bullyragging me, Diana. I'm going up when I've finished my cigarette. I think I deserve a bit of a rest after that foul journey."

"If you go now you'll just have time to say how d'you do and good night before the nurse has finished with Mother. She's counting on seeing you, you know, directly the nurse has gone."

Martin groaned, threw his cigarette into the fire and went upstairs.

He was not a child-lover, and he had not found that children necessarily gained in fascination because they were one's own. Personally he would have preferred not to have any; but Daphne had been so desperately set on having children—had cried so bitterly over one or two disappointments in that line—that he had been pleased for her sake when Tim and Angela arrived. Then Daphne, who loved them so much, had died, leaving them with him who loved them only a little. He had been glad when his mother had offered to take charge of them. He hoped he had been a good father, giving them every advantage that money could buy in the way of health and education; but he could not disguise from himself the fact that they bored him. Their immature minds wearied and emptied his. It had been a relief not to have them with him for the last four years.

The odd thing was that they both adored him. Whether it was the rarity of his contacts with them or the legend of himself which Nanny Wheeler had built up he could not say, but their welcome of him tonight was positively uproarious.

"Daddy! Daddy!" and ecstatic hugs knocked off his spectacles and disheveled his tie.

"Gently now—gently now."

They were both in bed, with an assortment of Kewpies, gollywogs and Teddy bears, and they both started talking at once—Angela full of the adventures of a fictitious family known as the Squeshams, Tim bursting with his own.

"Daddy, I want to tell you about Violet Squesham's Teddy bear. She's been given one for her birthday, you know, and it's got diamond eyes and a ruby nose and its name's Venable and it can talk." . . . "Daddy, the bus ran over a gray squirrel on the way to Rushmonden yesterday. I saw it lying out as flat as a pancake afterward. And Arthur says if you put halfpennies for the train to run over they get flattened out into pennies. I'm going to make a lot of money that way."

"Who's Arthur?" asked Martin suspiciously.

"Oh, you know, he belongs to Mrs. Hovenden. He goes to school in Rushmonden. It's a grammar school. Oh, Daddy, mayn't I go to the grammar school? I'm so tired of just doing lessons with Miss Courtenay."

"Wait till you're older."

"But I am older, I'm seven, Daddy—"

"Violet Squesham goes to school with June. She's doing her homework now, and she's head of the school, though she's only six."

Nanny Wheeler came in and Martin felt the immediate sense of security which had accompanied her entrances when he was a child. She looked to him very little different from what she had looked then. She could not have been more than twenty-five when she had taken charge of him "from the month," but to him she had been ageless. She looked ageless now. After all, the years had done very little to change her. She had never had to work hard—the slow rate of increase of the Laurelwood nursery had never given her more than one really young child at a time. She had been able to satisfy her natural love of children without any of the financial cares and ultimate responsibilities that it involved for their less privileged parents; she had known none of the strains and stresses of marriage, the monotony of housekeeping, the anxiety of money-making, the woes of bereavement. Why should she grow old?

"How do you do, sir? We're glad to see you here, I'm sure."

Martin was grateful to her for calling him sir. He had been Martin until he married and he had been terribly afraid that he would be Martin afterward. But Nanny Wheeler knew the rules

and had promoted him to Mr. Martin, which he had remained until his father's death made him Mr. Laurelwood.

"Your mother's ready for you now, sir," she said as they shook hands. "Say good night to Daddy, dears. He's got to go to Granny, and it's time you were asleep."

"But I haven't told him about my rabbit. I've got a rabbit, Daddy—Arthur gave it to me. It's a doe and—"

"You can tell me all about it tomorrow, but we must say good night now."

He kissed both the children. He felt that perhaps he ought to stop kissing Tim, who was nearly eight, but decided this was not a moment for controversial changes.

"Daddy," cried his son unexpectedly, nearly swallowing his father's mustache, "I heard a ghost last night in Clearhedge Wood. It went Whoo-hoo, Whoo-hoo."

"Nonsense—that was an owl."

"Oh no it wasn't, because I looked out and I saw it like a light among the trees."

"Daddy, Daddy," shouted Angela. "Violet Squesham lives in a haunted house and there are ghosts all night dancing round her bed, and—"

"Now," intervened Nanny Wheeler, "you know I don't allow any talk about ghosts the last thing at night."

Martin could remember her making an exactly similar statement when he was a child.

"Good night, children. Be good and go to sleep quickly," and he went out, leaving them lying in their two little beds each side of Nanny Wheeler's big one, just as he and Diana used to lie in the old days in this very same room.

He was anxious to see his mother. He loved her better than he loved his children—better than he had loved her when he was a child. In his younger days she had fretted him with her interferences and disgusted him with her little hypocrisies, but these had seemed to recede from him when he grew up, to mean and to matter less. His father's death had brought them closer to each other and his wife's death closer still. He had been planning to run down and see the children before Diana's telegram summoned him to Idolsfold. And he always spent Christmas at Tunbridge Wells.

It was shocking to talk as if he were ever remiss. People like Diana, married to a rich man who had only to look in at the works for a few hours every day, or like Meg, married to a man who did

no work at all except edit a subversive weekly, hadn't an idea of the work entailed by an old-established family solicitor's business—No time for jaunts, for filial or fatherly visits. Even Christmas involved contrivance. He knocked at his mother's door.

"Come in," said a bright voice, and the next minute Martin was facing the bright smile of the hospital nurse. His first thought on seeing her was of Cicely Courtneidge as Nurse Tunnybell—she seemed to have her upper denture fixed on exteriorly in the same way.

"Good evening."

"Good evening—*now* you'll be pleased," and the teeth flashed over her shoulder at the bed.

"Martin," said his mother's voice.

He waited till the nurse had shut the door behind her before he bent down and kissed the thin, flushed face on the pillow.

"Mother darling—how are you? Are you really better now?"

"Yes, really better. In fact I feel guilty at having brought you all here. But Nanny took fright and wired Diana and Diana would send for you and Meg. Besides, there was a time when I was quite ill."

"I know, and you must be very careful from now on. I'm glad you've got a nurse to look after you."

"Oh, Dr. Freethorn got one at once. She's very nice, but I'll be glad when she's gone."

"You must keep her till you're perfectly well again. Tell me, is Dr. Freethorn a good doctor? Wouldn't you like me to get another opinion from London?"

"Oh, I'm to see a specialist when I'm over this. But there's no need to get in anyone now. I like Dr. Freethorn so much, and he's done wonders for me."

He sat down by the bedside and took her hand, which was hot and dry. He felt relieved to find her looking so well. He had expected a pale and languorous invalid, but here she was with more color in her cheeks than when he had seen her last. She looked curiously young, too, for the nurse had tied back her fluffy white hair with a ribbon the color of her eyes, which were full of a strange excitement.

"Martin, it's lovely to have you all here. You will stay over the week end, won't you?"

"Let me see—today's Friday. I ought to get back tomorrow, but—"

"You will stay. You can't work on Sunday, surely. Do stay, dear. It will give me such pleasure—make it worth while being ill," and her excited eyes grew mischievous.

"Very well, I'll stay." He could not resist his mother, looking so young.

"That will be lovely, quite lovely, having you all here, just like the old days. All of us here together again, except poor Boy. But I daresay we'll hear from him during the week end. There's a letter due from him about now."

Poor Boy, indeed! But what about poor Father? Martin was struck by her omission of his father. Was it because the wound was still painful, though eight years old? Or had she really forgotten him?

As Bess fetched extra pudding plates from the little cubby under the stairs, she smiled to think that it once had been her own private room where she had kept her personal possessions. Its dingy walls had been gay with her pictures—bright rather than gay, perhaps, for she remembered that her pictures, though highly colored, had all been tragic as to subject: battles, fires and crucifixions. Meg Laurelwood had been frightened of some of them; they had been part of her subjection of Meg Laurelwood.

Another part had been her toy-table. She had had no cupboard for her toys, so she had arranged them on a little table, as on a shop counter, where they had glowed in their bright colors, and driven Meg into shudders and dawns of desire, like a cat when it sees you pouring out the cream.

"What are you smiling at, Mum?" asked June, as she came back with the plates into the kitchen.

"At something I remembered about myself and Mrs. Cayless when we were little girls."

"What?"

"I can't tell you now. It would take too long, and you must get on with your homework. I shall have to lay the table in a minute."

It was a nuisance, this homework, a nuisance that the Council School had spared her own self and her mother. June and Arthur were driven about the house with their books when she had paying guests. Of course in the holidays it did not matter, but March was an awkward month to have so many people.

She was able to lay the greater part of the supper round the two toilers, but in the end she had to tell them to remove their things.



"You can finish when I've cleared away. Go and wash your hands now, both of you."

"Shall I tell Uncle supper's ready?" asked June.

"You can knock at his door, but don't go in."

"What shall I do if he doesn't answer?"

"Nothing—he'll come down if he wants to."

George folded away the newspaper he was reading by the fire.

"Have you seen Dick at all today?"

"No. I knocked at his door at dinnertime, but it was locked and he said he didn't want any dinner. I expect he'll be hungry now."

George grunted.

The kitchen was a dark yet cheerful room which Bess had fitted out as attractively as she knew how, so that George and the children should not feel the loss of the dining room to the visitors. The windows were covered by checked gingham curtains, copied from a kitchen she had seen in a play. *The Farmer's Wife* it had been called, but no farmer's wife Bess knew had ever had a kitchen like it till now. In further imitation she had put Dad's old pewter pots, which Mother had always kept shut away, on the dresser with her best china. It meant more dusting, but it made the place look superior—almost like a Tea Room.

"What are we having for supper tonight?" asked George.

"Macaroni cheese—us. I've made them some soup as well."

"Why trouble to do that?"

"They're used to late dinner, you know."

"Did your mother give them soup?"

"Yes, always, before their boiled eggs. They had boiled eggs, you know, every single night as well as for breakfast. Being from London, they fancied it. When Mrs. Laurelwood came back, she said she didn't care about soup—just the eggs; but with them all here like this I thought I'd do something better."

"Well, I should have thought the macaroni cheese was good enough. Why don't you give them a supper you can lay on the table all at once, instead of catering in and out the way you do?"

"I like going in and out," said Bess. "I like seeing them and listening to what they say."

She carried the soup in little cups which she had bought at the Tudor Tea Rooms in Rushmonden. When she had set them on the table she rang a brass cowbell from the same source.

It was a summons to both parties. June and Arthur came tumbling

down the kitchen stairs before the Laurelwoods had assembled in the dining room.

"Mum, I knocked at Uncle's door and he said he was coming."

"That's all right, then. I've laid for him, but we won't wait."

They all sat down round the checked tablecloth that matched the curtains and also owed its origin to a stage conception of farm life.

June began at once: "Mum, you said you'd tell me something you were smiling at about you and Mrs. Cayless when you were little girls."

"It was only that she always envied me my toys, and it struck me as funny that she should, because I don't suppose any one of them was worth more than twopence and she had all sorts of lovely expensive toys of her own."

"She must have been silly. Mum, was Mrs. Herbert-Taylor a little girl when you were too?"

"No, she was seven or eight years older than me; she used to be your Aunt Emmy's friend as far as she was anybody's, that's to say. And she's not Mrs. Herbert-Taylor, you know. It's 'Mrs. Hurlbutt-Taylor.'"

"I never heard such a name before," said George. "No wonder June can't get it right."

Arthur, who had not uttered a word since he came into the room, now said: "Mrs. Halibut-Taylor," and subsided into stodgy laughter.

"Can't we call her just Mrs. Taylor?" asked his sister.

"No, indeed. She's very particular about her hyphen."

"What's a hyphen?"

Bess was spared a definition by the opening of the staircase door and the entry of her brother Dick.

"Hullo, Dick."

He came in shambling and smiling—shambling in his carpet slippers, smiling that smile that seemed to light up not only his face but the room. It was wonderful, Bess sometimes thought, how his face had kept that clear, innocent look. It had not grown red and coarse as so many men's did when they carried on like him.

"Hullo, Bess—hullo, George—hullo, kids."

He sat down, still smiling. His smile was his propitiation; he knew the uselessness of words. When he picked up his spoon and fork for the macaroni cheese you saw his hands shake. That was how you could tell.

"It's an uncommon dark night," he said, making conversation, "and I think it's turning colder."

"Maybe there'll be some frost," said Bess. "There's a look of it in the fire."

"Mum, has Mrs. Hurlbutt-Taylor any children?"

"Yes—two, I think."

"Why aren't they here like Mr. Laurelwood's children?"

"I'm very glad they aren't. Besides, they're much older. I believe the daughter's married."

"Mum, is she really older than you? She looks much younger."

Bess felt angry, because she knew this was true.

"Well, she isn't," she said briefly.

"Uncle Dick hasn't seen her, has he? Or Mrs. Cayless either or Mr. Laurelwood?"

"You'd better go in and speak to them after supper," said Bess to her brother. "They were asking after you."

Another time he might not be looking so presentable.

"I don't think I will," said Dick, his smile wiped off. "I expect they'd rather I came round tomorrow morning."

"You won't look so well in daylight," said Bess and immediately felt ashamed of herself as she always did when she tore off his little disguises.

"Oh, yes I will, I promise."

His humility bruised her and she felt tears coming. It was a relief when the little brass bell tinkled suddenly, calling her into the next room.

"They've finished their soup."

As she opened the door a buzz of conversation came from the Laurelwoods. She left the door open while she cleared away the soup cups and carried in the macaroni cheese. The two supper parties were invisible to each other, but crumbs of talk blew from the Laurelwood's table into the silent kitchen.

"Do you remember that time when" . . . "It must have been your getting engaged, Diana" . . . "that time at the Mallenders" . . . "Or was it because Father stopped painting?" . . . "I think they were afraid Martin might want to be a farmer" . . . "What utter nonsense!" . . . "Do you remember—"

The door was shut.

"What are they talking about, Mum?"

"About the old days when they used to come here every summer. I think they're wondering why they ever gave it up."

"Did they really come here every single summer?"

"Yes—as regular as harvest."

"Then why did they stop?"

Bess shook her head.

"I don't know."

"Suppose the harvest stopped coming," giggled Arthur.

Bess said nothing. She was thinking, remembering. Father and Mother could scarcely have been more upset if the harvest had failed. Poor Mother! Poor soul! How she had cried and scolded. Her words came back with a reproach that was far keener now than it had been at the time. "This is your doing, Bess, you wicked girl, I'm sure all this is because of you."

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## BESS LARDNER

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THE LONG AFTERNOON, SWIMMY WITH HEAT AND SUNSHINE, DAWDLED on. The air of the classroom felt thick, like water, and looking across it at the teacher's desk made her think of a fish looking across a pond. The sunlight spilling in from the high window seemed to lie on the air as on water, except that it didn't flicker and dance but boiled instead with motes . . . dust . . . It was funny that all that dust should be in the air, filling her chest every time she breathed. Or was it only in the sunshine? Did the dust float into the sunshine or was it everywhere? She sucked her paintbrush reflectively.

"Bess Lardner!"

She jumped and the brush fell with a tiny rattle to the floor. She stooped to pick it up and saw a hole in the heel of one of Lily Hovenden's stockings.

"Bess Lardner, how many times have I told you not to suck your brush? You'll poison yourself one of these days. And don't sit there mooning—get on with your work. Or have you finished it?"

"No, Miss."

"Get on with it, then."

Bess got on. Dipping her brush in the paint pool, she flattened it on the piece of gray paper, and the appleblossom had another petal, shading from white to palest pink. It really looked very pretty, quite like the real thing, except that the stalk was a bit smudged.

Dick would be pleased with it; he always liked her flowers best when they were painted on gray or brown paper—partly, perhaps, because colored paper never had the grimy look that white paper acquired in her satchel on the way home if it did not do so on her desk. The smudge would prevent Teacher thinking it good enough to pin on the board and thus rob her of Dick's delighted praise. She smiled and flattened on another petal.

That was six, and an appleblossom only had five . . . never mind. No doubt an appleblossom could have six petals just as a lamb could have six legs, and be all the more interesting. She might even show this masterpiece to Meg Laurelwood. But Meg was not an uncritical admirer of her painting, like Dick. She had her own paintbox and lots of painting books, and her father had a paintbox too, twice as big even as Meg's, and a sketching block and an easel and a campstool like a real artist. So it was no good trying to impress Meg with her appleblossom—better rely, as before, on her toys. Her hand crept into her pocket and lovingly fingered two pennies.

Another interruption—this time from the clock. It struck four, and at once the room became full of rattlings, scufflings, cracklings, and thumpings, as the class with one accord stopped work and began to pack up to go home..

"Children! Children!" cried Teacher. "I haven't told you that you may go yet. How many times have I said you're not to put away your things till I've given you leave? Sit still all of you. I want to see what you've done."

"But it's struck four, Miss."

"Never mind. I want to see your work."

She came round the desks with maddening slowness, marking all the brush paintings and choosing those which were to go on the board. She took two marks off Bess for the smudge and three for the extra petal. "Miss No-Eyes, I shall call you. You've lived in the country all your life and you don't know how many petals an appleblossom's got."

Bess did not defend herself with examples from other fields of natural history. If Teacher had not heard—which she possibly had not, being from a town—of six-legged lambs and four-legged chickens and even, once, a calf with two heads, her ignorance was too deep to be enlightened in the time at Bess's disposal. She must get off quickly, or there would not be time to go to the shop—at least not time to make her choice with the thought and care that the occasion demanded.

It was a quarter past four before she was in the street. If she was home later than five Mother would think she had been kept in, which would make her specially angry today, as she would be afraid of what Mrs. Laurelwood would think about it.

"Look here," she said to Lily Hovenden, "we've got our gentry arriving today. You might call in and tell Mother I'll be late for tea, because I'm going to the shop. Don't let her think I've been kept in."

"But I want us to walk home together," said Lily, who was sometimes inclined to be too friendly.

"But I want to go to the shop."

"I can come with you there."

"No, you can't. You haven't got any money."

"But I can still come to the shop. Please let me. I want to see what you buy with yours."

"But I want you to go to my home and tell Mother I'll be a bit late for tea."

Lily's love turned suddenly to hate.

"Very well. I won't come with you. But I won't go and tell your Mother, neither. I'll tell George."

She put out her tongue and ran away, leaving Bess face to face with a serious threat. George, hearing that she was walking home alone, would quite probably turn back and rob her of her money or her toy, whichever happened to be in her possession at the time of assault. He was a horrid boy, and the only advantage of Teacher keeping the girls late (as she so often did, the cat) was that it gave the boys time to get well on their way home before the girls came out—their teacher having an opposite tendency to release them ahead of time.

She would have to go quickly to the shop and keep an eye on the street to see if he came back. If he did she would ask Mrs. Austin to let her out through the back and then slip home across the fields. She thought that she would do that anyhow, because it was more than likely that he would not come all the way back to Copstreet, but lurk behind some hedge on her way home, and then rush out on her, as he had done a week ago at Puddingcake. At present she had some ten minutes in hand before Lily could reach him and send him after her.

She walked a few yards up the village to the shop. Copstreet was little more than a row of houses appearing suddenly on the road from Appledore to Rushmonden just at the point where it rose out of the marsh and disappearing as it sank down into it again.

The houses were mostly very old, with red, weathered fronts like apples; one of them had a bow window filled with jars of sweets and bottles of colored drinks.

Inside were great hanging clusters of boots—men's on one side of the door, women's on the other. There was stuff, too—rolls of serge and pretty printed cottons on shelves behind the counter. Tea, sugar, lard, cheese and other groceries were kept in a sort of cave at the back and displayed themselves only as a smell—a rich, composite smell that seemed to fill the place and could almost be tasted.

"Well, Bessie dear," said Mrs. Austin smiling, "what have you come for today?"

Bess was not sure whether to spend the whole of her twopence on a very special toy or buy a penny toy and a penny bottle of raspberry fizz.

"What have you got?" she asked cautiously.

"Well, there's some Surprise Packets. . . ."

Bess shook her head. Repeated experiments had revealed a depressing monotony in the contents of Surprise Packets. She could expect a puzzle, a tiny box of crayons, a celluloid tortoise, a celluloid fish, a notebook or a magnet; but as she already possessed all of these there was no sense in spending a penny on the repetition of any one of them. She asked:

"Have you got any watches?"

"Yes, I've got some nice watches."

A handful of watches was laid on the counter.

"Are these a penny?"

"Most of them, dear. That one with the diamonds is twopence."

"I've got one with diamonds already. Have you any raspberry fizz?"

"Yes, dear, and strawberry too, and ginger."

A long, interesting period now began—a period of examination, hesitation, selection, retraction. George Hovenden was forgotten. Bess did not even look out of the window to see if he was outside. She hung over the watches, fingering them and winding them; she smelt the raspberry fizz, the strawberry fizz, the ginger fizz. She could not make up her mind.

It was just what she liked, having no one else in the shop, so nothing to hurry her. But in the end Mrs. Austin said: "Make up your mind, dear. I've got to go and get my tea. And I expect your mother will be wondering where you are."



"But I can't decide. How much did you say this one with the pictures is?"

"That's twopence."

"May I wind it again?"

"Yes, of course, dear."

Bess wound the watch and the hands went round and round. That was just like any other watch; but in addition, this one had a small shutter at the bottom of the dial, and as she wound a procession of cocks, hens, ducks, pigs, cows and other farmyard animals moved across it. The watch was gold and the animals were painted in brilliant colors.

"I think I'll have that one."

"It's a pretty watch, isn't it, dear?"

"Yes it is. Do you really think it's worth twopence?"

"Oh, certainly. That's a twopenny watch. You take it, dear, and run off now, or Mother will be worrying."

Bess took it, reluctantly handed over two warm pennies, and went out into the street. Not till she was there did she remember George, but luckily he was nowhere to be seen. No doubt he had not thought it worth while to come back. Either he had gone home or was waiting for her somewhere on the road. She would go home by the fields—it was quicker, anyhow.

On the north of Copstreet the marsh had been "inneed," and nearly a mile of water meadows stretched from the foot of the hill to the opposite Wealden slope, where Idolsfold could be seen baking in the sunshine with its oasts and barns. The Silcocks Channel ran through them and Bess made for the only crossing place, appropriately known as Shakey Bridge. She had been told that in the old days, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, these grassy meadows under her feet had been the bottom of the sea. The sea had come in all the way from Romney Marsh and spread both sides of Copstreet Hill. In those days the Isle of Oxney had really been an island, and so had Copstreet, and Stone and Chapel Bank. Stone Ferry and Oxney Ferry had been real ferries, with ferryboats linking up the roads that ran down into the water. She knew all this because she had heard it last week in the Scripture lesson. Mr. Colenutt, the vicar, came in every week to "take" Religious Knowledge, and by some mysterious but inevitable process Religious Knowledge often became knowledge of the old days at Rushmonden and Copstreet. Last week's information had been gleaned by way of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

As she ran through the soft wet grass Bess pretended that she was running across the bottom of the sea.

"I'm a mermaid," she cried to Mr. Kemp's cows. "I've got a coral necklace and my hair is full of shells."

The way home across the fields was actually shorter than the way by the road, but she did not often come by it, partly out of a taste for company, and partly because for at least nine months of the year the ground was really a little too like the bottom of the sea. Even on this July evening there was a certain amount of damp and mud, and loud were her mother's lamentations as she ran into the kitchen.

"Where *have* you been, Bess? How often have I told you to come straight home from school? Today, too, of all days. *They're here.*"

"I went to the shop," said Bess. "I've bought a gold watch," and she exhibited her purchase.

"Well, if you choose to waste your money on that sort of thing . . . And look at your feet—I shall have to do the kitchen floor again. Take off your boots at once."

Bess sat down and began to unlace her boots.

"When did they come?" she asked.

"At the time they always come—by the 3:58 at Rushmonden. You could have been here if you'd hurried home."

"Has Meg got her hair in pigtails again this year?"

"Miss Meg, you're not to forget that. And I shan't tell you anything about her, since you've been such a naughty, disobliging girl. When you've taken your boots off, go upstairs and wash and brush your hair and put on your dress with the blue spots."

Bess knew this meant that an encounter with the Laurelwoods was imminent, so bore her mother no ill will for refusing to satisfy her curiosity as to Meg's pigtails. Whistling cheerfully, she carried her muddy boots into the scullery, and then, before going upstairs, slipped into her own special little room to deposit her watch.

Bess's room, as it had been called ever since she was a tiny thing, was little more than a cupboard in size, but a cupboard with a window and enough floor space to accommodate a bamboo table wanted nowhere else in the house. It had been given her at a time when her smallness, helplessness and fretfulness had aroused the sadistic instincts of the brother next her in age. Clarence had taken a fiendish delight in breaking her toys, so Mother had given her the little room under the stairs to keep them in and a key to lock

the door. When about a year later Clarence turned into a nice, quiet kindhearted boy, the privileges of occupation remained. After all, Bess was almost like an only girl, her sister Emmy being the eldest of the family and grown up to the point of having a sweetheart. She needed a place of her own, where she could keep her girl things and play her girl games, away from the boys and men and women that made up the rest of the household.

Bess's room had not, however, a particularly feminine atmosphere. The walls were covered with pictures that in their lurid sensationalism suggested, with one exception, the supplements of a boys' magazine. Indeed the series "London Firemen at Work" had originally been a gift from *Our Boys' Weekly* to its readers Dick and Clarence Lardner, handed over in exchange for some Surprise Packet duplicates. There were also one or two highly colored studies of Red Indians and their victims acquired by the same method from the same source.

The remaining picture was of more exotic origin, being a terrifyingly realistic and bloodstained Crucifixion, which had found its way mysteriously to Idolsfold from some continental *bondieusarderie*. Bess had discovered it a year or two ago in one of the upstairs cupboards, and it had become the gem of her collection. Not only was she delighted to find that the Bible had aspects as bloodcurdling as any London fire or Indian massacre, but the picture had furthermore gratified her sense of truth. "It must have been like that," she had explained last year to a shocked and horrified Meg. "It's the other pictures that must be wrong and this one right. I reckon no one could have all that done to them and look as if they liked it."

Her pictures were the same this year as last. There was nothing new to startle or impress Meg Laurelwood. But she had some new toys: the milk cart Dick had made her and the toy bird in a cage that Granny had given her for Christmas, two new sorts of Surprise Packet, too—she did not think that Meg had seen the puzzle or the fish. And now there was her watch—Meg always noticed watches. She took it out and wound it proudly. She was glad now that she had bought it and not a penny one and a bottle of fizz. She had had her doubts about it for a few thirsty minutes on the way home, but now she was content.

She did not meet the Laurelwoods till after tea. By the time she had put on the blue spotted dress her mother had decided that she

was to have her tea before going to pay her respects in the new part.

"They aren't quite ready yet. Miss Wheeler thought she'd like to get some of her unpacking done before tea and that made them late. They're having it now."

"What are they having?" asked Bess.

"I made them some scones and some fairy cakes, and there's this year's strawberry jam just nice for them."

How dull it sounded. How much nicer was thick black treacle than homemade strawberry jam, how superior was a sardine to a fairy cake and an onion to a scone. Bess knew that Meg envied the Lardner tea table—she had sardines only occasionally at breakfast and had never eaten a raw onion in her life. Once she had begged Bess to smuggle her out this luxury, but Bess knew better than that: "It would give you a stomach ache."

This evening only the women of the family were having tea in the low, dark, green-papered dining room that led out of the kitchen. The men would be out in the fields for at least another hour, but Mother wanted to get tea over, so that she and Emmy and Rosie Boorman could get started on the supper and the hot water for the baths. Rosie, being the servant, had her tea by herself in the kitchen. Round the dining room table sat Mother and Granny and Emmy and Bess, drinking black sweet tea out of big cups and talking about the Laurelwoods.

Though only female Lardners were present, there was a male dilution of the company in the shape of old Mr. Morris, who had come to see Granny, as he always did two or three times a week. Many years ago—perhaps in the days when Copstreet was an island—old Mr. Morris had worked for Granny's father. Dick said he had wanted to marry Granny but had not been allowed to. Mother said that was all nonsense. Anyway, now that he was too old to work and lived with a grandson and his wife over at Shadoxhurst, he was always coming to see her, trundling the three miles on his funny old-fashioned tricycle, with its big wheels rising each side above his head. He never spoke at tea, nor hardly ever to anyone except Granny; and when he spoke he was hard to understand, because he had the old speech of the countryside and no teeth in his head. His hair was white as hawthorn and his cheeks were as red as apples, and his eyes were blue and wide like a baby's, so that it was queer to see the white frill of beard round his face.

"Another cup of tea, Mr. Morris," said Mother. "Bess, there's

two things that will surprise you when you go into the new part.”  
“What things?”

“Well, you’ll never guess. One is, Miss Diana’s put her hair up.”

Bess was unmoved, but Emmy at once gave tongue.

“She really is a picture. I never thought she’d be pretty till I saw her today. She’s done it all in swathes—a hairdresser must have fixed it some time or other.”

“She’s been to her first ball,” said Mother proudly. “Mrs. Laurelwood was telling me.”

“And danced every dance, with partners waiting,” said Emmy.

Bess despised her mother and sister’s attitude toward the visitors. They talked as if they got something for themselves out of their possessions, triumphs and pleasures. Her father and the boys, except Joe, who went his own way, were nearly as bad. She was the only person in the family who did not envy the Laurelwoods. She knew better—she had made them (in the person of Meg) envy her.

“She’s a beautiful young lady,” said Granny, “that’s certain. But not as beautiful as her mother was when she was a girl. Miss Frances Raikes as she was when she first came here, and I remember she used to wear a shiny green dress with a pale blue yoke—like a princess she looked in it.”

Granny was worse than anyone at flattering and praising the Laurelwoods, but Bess did not mind her doing it, partly because she chiefly praised a bygone generation, the present Mr. Laurelwood’s father and mother and his sisters Gertrude and Elizabeth, and partly because Bess herself loved Granny better than anyone else in the world. Granny was always her friend and comforter when Father grumbled at her or Mother scolded; she had always taken her part, soothed her and somehow sorted out a way of getting what she wanted. Bess could remember one time long ago when she was a very little girl and because something had gone wrong had leaned all one afternoon with her head in her grandmother’s lap, drawing comfort from her warm knees, her soft voice and stroking fingers.

“They’ve all grown,” said Mother. “Master Martin’s quite a big boy.”

“Has Meg—Miss Meg—grown? Is she as tall as me?”

“Taller, I should think. What do you say, Emmy?”

“Oh, yes, taller. She’s shot up, like, since she was here last, while Bess is kind of dumpy.”

This was dreadful.

"And what do you think she's brought with her this year?" continued Mother, "The most beautiful baby doll you ever saw. It was given her for her birthday, and all its clothes are handmade and take off and on and it opens and shuts its eyes and says 'Mamma.'"

"I reckon she's too old for dolls," Bess shouted furiously.

"Nonsense; she's only nine."

"That's too old."

"Now, don't you talk like that, Bess. I don't like to hear it."

"I bet you wouldn't be too old for that doll," said Emmy, "if it was given you."

"Have you seen it?"

"No, it isn't unpacked yet. But both Mrs. Laurelwood and Miss Wheeler were telling us about it."

"Well, perhaps it's nothing very much, after all. And anyway I say she's too old."

"You know nothing whatever about it," said her mother sternly, "and take care what you're doing or you'll spill your tea."

Bess finished her meal in silence, brooding deeply. She did not really envy Meg the doll, for if Meg was too old for dolls, Bess was older still, a whole year older. She had not played with a doll since she was a little tiny girl and had had that red-faced rag thing that used to belong to Emmy. Dolls were silly. But Meg might be all cock-a-hoop about hers, in which case it would be more difficult for Bess to maintain her superior position. She would have to get hold of something very wonderful or do something very daring if this summer was to be like last.

In consequence of these thoughts her spirits were subdued when she made her way into the new part.

"Now, whatever you do, don't forget to knock at the door. I won't have you bursting in," her mother had said. She knocked at the door.

"Come in," said Mrs. Laurelwood, and Bess came in, a very different Bess from the critic and rebel at the tea table. She stood just inside the door, fingering the hem of the blue spotted dress, her head held down, so that the weight of her hair ribbon swung her hair over her cheek.

"Come in, dear, don't be shy," said Mrs. Laurelwood, holding out her hand.

Bess shook hands with her and Mr. Laurelwood. No one else was in the room, and she hoped that Meg had not gone out of doors,

so that she would have to stay alone with these two uninteresting people. Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood always seemed to her flat and faded compared with her own father and mother. They spoke in flat empty voices and said nothing but dull things. They moved quietly; they never shouted or stamped or crashed or kicked. They often laughed, it is true, but at such silly jokes that their laughter did not seem to mean anything.

"Well, here we are again," said Mr. Laurelwood jovially. "How's Bess?"

Bess mumbled something that might just be recognized as "Quite well, thank you."

"And how are you getting on at school?" asked Mrs. Laurelwood.

She pleaded the blue spotted dress. "Aw righ'."

"Still the same shy little girl. Never mind, dear. Meg will be here in a moment. She's upstairs now, unpacking something she wants to show you."

That must be the doll. Well, if she reckoned Bess would think anything of a doll. . . . Silence dwelt in the little room with its flowery wallpaper and flowery cushioned chairs. Mr. Laurelwood cleared his throat but said nothing. Mrs. Laurelwood looked as if she wanted to say something, but did not quite know what to say. The silence lasted another minute. Then she asked again. "How are you getting on at school?"

She was silly. "Aw righ'," said Bess.

There was a movement in the next room.

"That's Diana," said Mrs. Laurelwood. "Diana, here's Bess."

Diana opened the door from the visitors' dining room, holding a colored magazine in her hand. Bess had forgotten all about her having put her hair up, and for a moment hardly recognized her. She used to have a long thick plait hanging down her back, tied with a floppy bow at the bottom and behind each ear. If she wasn't wearing her gym tunic she would wear short linen frocks or a flannel coat and skirt, under which her long black legs seemed to be showing more than half of her. Now her legs were hidden in a long tight skirt, into the waist of which was tucked a smart blouse. Her hair was draped across her forehead and over the back of her head, with a big swathe passing right round it all over her ears. She seemed to have more hair than anyone Bess had ever seen.

"Hullo, Bess," said Diana, very grown up and patronizing. She

never used to take much notice of her, but now she talked to her in the same silly way all grown-up gentry did.

"Have you been to school today?"

"Yes."

"Of course—you don't get your holidays till September, because of the hop-picking."

"No."

"That's hard lines on you, with Meg here. You won't get much time for playing together."

What did she mean? Every other year it had been the same, but they had managed all right. Why was Diana talking like this just because she had put her hair up?

"Diana, dear," said Mrs. Laurelwood, "you might run upstairs and tell Meg that Bess is here."

Diana went out, looking so funny as she hurried in her long tight skirt, like somebody in a sack race, that Bess nearly laughed.

"Meg has been given a lovely present," said Mrs. Laurelwood. "Her godmother has been to stay with us and brought her a beautiful baby doll from Paris. All its clothes are handmade, and—but I won't tell you any more about it, because I know that Meg is dying to show it to you herself."

After this it was rather surprising that Meg should come down without the doll.

"Hullo," she said. "Hullo," said Bess.

They stared at each other with considerable satisfaction.

"But, Meg," cried her mother, "where's Veronique?"

"I left her upstairs."

"Run and fetch her at once. Bess is dying to see her."

Meg ran out of the room, and Mrs. Laurelwood explained that the doll had a French name because she came from Paris. Bess, as she waited, found comfort in the thought that though Meg might be half an inch taller than herself she was not nearly so broad and looked very much younger in her rompers and childish socks.

But comfort died when she came back into the room. She carried something which Bess had not hitherto even imagined. When her mother and Mrs. Laurelwood had talked about a doll she had pictured only the sort of doll she herself had seen, a little thing with a hard wax face, goggling eyes, wooly hair and clothes that were a mere rough sketch of what a real child wore. She had expected Meg's doll to be superior to her own past Ivy both in clothes and in bodily composition, but she was totally unprepared



for the wonder now in her arms. The doll looked like a real baby, as big, and dressed in the same way. Its long embroidered robe hung nearly to the floor, and over it was a cape of cream-colored silk, edged with row upon row of baby ribbon. Quiltings of lace and ribbon were round its little bonnet under the soft silk veil. Meg lifted the veil and there was a sleeping face so like reality in its tinted porcelain that from Bess's lips and heart together came a long sigh.

"Isn't she lovely?" said Meg, looking pleased. "And her clothes take off and on."

She proceeded to demonstrate this, Bess watching her in torment. Mrs. Laurelwood hung lovingly over them both.

"Isn't it a beautiful dolly, Bess? Isn't Meg a lucky girl?"

When all the clothes had been taken off, displayed and put on again, Bess found that Meg's proud ownership was not without its restrictions. When she proposed taking the doll with them into the garden her mother immediately said, "No, dear. You might spoil her if you played with her out of doors. Leave her here and I'll take her up to Nanny when I go to say good night to Boy."

So the doll was carefully settled on a cushion, and Meg and Bess went out together into the long, bright evening. The sun was still high in the southwest, dappling the grass under the pear trees with moving light. The flowers in the bed under the dining-room window glowed in a regiment of colors. They had been specially planted to come up when the Laurelwoods were there—snapdragons, canterbury bells, hollyhocks, sunflowers, asters, all the summer flowers. It would have been thought a waste of time to grow flowers for the months the visitors were not at Idolsfold, and Father had been quite angry with Dick when he suggested it. Dick had wanted to grow daffodils under the pear trees, and to keep the grass mown all the summer through; but Father had said that was nothing but a waste of time. "Who wants flowers?" he had asked. "I do," said Dick and Father had been angry.

All Dick had been allowed was to grow flowers for the Laurelwoods and scythe the grass when it was ready for hay. But nobody objected when he borrowed the Hovenden's old mower and ran over the lawn with it the day before the gentry arrived. The garden with its lawn and flower bed and two pear trees was all in front of the new part. The old part looked straight out onto the horse field, with the horsepond only five yards from the kitchen door.

Bess opened the garden gate. By common consent they passed from the tidy smartness of the new part into the freedom of the old.

"Tell me," said Meg, "have you any new toys?"

She asked that every year, and it had always been for Bess a proud opportunity. But now she was aware how mean any one of her toys must look in comparison with Meg's new doll. Nothing like the doll had ever been brought to Idolsfold before. On the whole Meg's toys, at least such as she traveled with, were not of an exciting nature and seldom aroused envy in one trading regularly with Mrs. Austin's shop in Copstreet. Meg herself fostered this attitude by her covetous admiration of Bess's possessions, which were totally unlike her own conventional, if more expensive, assortment of games, puzzles and picture books, packed for Idolsfold no doubt by her elders with a view to a rainy day. Sometimes she would hint grandly at some treasure left at home, but never in a manner to excite or even convince her rival. This doll and its display were something entirely new.

"Why did you bring that doll with you this year?" she asked gruffly, ignoring her question.

"Mrs. Elliott only gave her to me last week, so Mummy thought it a pity to leave her behind. Besides, I wanted you to see her."

"You're too old for dolls."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm not."

"I haven't played with dolls since I was a liddle tod."

"All the girls at school in my class have dolls, and Marjorie Stevens has one and she's twelve and in the fourth."

"She must be silly."

"She isn't."

"She is."

"She isn't."

The conversation languished. Meg revived it by repeating her first, unanswered question.

"Have you any new toys?"

"I reckon I've had several since you were here last."

"Can I see them?"

A year ago Bess would proudly have led the way to her private apartment, but the sight of the doll had filled her with a new reluctance. Nothing she had could compete with that doll. It was

better that Meg should not see her table—not till Bess had recovered her ascendancy by some other means.

"I'm not so sure we'd better go in now. Mother's busy getting the supper. Some other day I'll take you in."

"What new toys have you got?"

"My granny gave me a bird for Christmas."

"A real bird?"

"No, but it's got real feathers and it sits in a cage—a pretty cage like a basket, red, green and blue, with a hook at the top to hang it up by."

Meg looked impressed.

"Oh, Bess, do let me see it soon."

"I will. And Dick's carved me out a milk cart, with liddle tins for churns."

"I wish Martin would carve me something, but he won't."

Bess was feeling better.

"Joe he made me a chair once, but he didn't paint it. Dick's painted his."

"Daddy could paint one for me if Martin would only carve it."

"Maybe he couldn't carve it if he tried."

"Oh, yes, I think he could. He does fretwork at school, and he made two frames for Daddy's pictures. But he says he can't be bothered to make toys."

"Some day I'll ask Dick to carve one for you and paint it too—or I could paint it with my crayons. Come along now and see me feed the chickens."

The old relationship seemed in a fair way to being restored—externally, that is, for deep in the cradle of Bess's heart lay the image of that lovely doll. She understood now why girls of nine or ten or even older played with dolls. To have a doll like that would be like having a baby of one's own—it had looked almost alive, and its clothes had been as good as a real baby's. What fun to wash and iron them and peg them out on the line, as Emmy and Rosie pegged the clothes on Mondays. She could rig up a little line in the orchard and watch the things waving and flapping in the wind . . .

Luckily Meg did not seem inclined to boast or even to talk about her treasure. They spent a comfortable and friendly hour in the farmyard, throwing handfuls of wheat to the hens, hanging over the edge of the sty and watching the little pigs fighting round the old sow's dugs as she lay snoring, stroking Nell the yard dog

and taking her off her chain to play with them in the orchard. It was not till Nanny Wheeler had been shouting quite a time out of the bedroom window that they had to stop pretending not to hear.

"Meg! Meg! Where are you? Are you coming in? It's time you had your bath."

"Oh, well, I suppose I must go," said Meg, restoring Bess still further to her self-esteem, for her own bedtime did not come till all the Lardners went to bed at night. She knew that Meg bitterly envied her this privilege.

Its enjoyment, however, was not to be unchecked. Hardly had the discomfited Meg gone into the house than Emmy came tearing out of it, evidently looking for her sister.

"Oh, there you are. You can come in now and help Mother lay the table. Ted's here."

Ted Arboys was Emmy's young man, who had a bicycle shop in Rushmonden. He came to see her two or three times a week, cycling over when his day's work was done.

"It's awkward he should have come this evening," said Mother. "I did my best to stop him—I've told him twenty times if I've told him once that our Family were arriving today. But he doesn't think of anything but his own convenience."

"He thinks of *me*," said Emmy, "he wants to see *me*, and it isn't every evening he gets the chance. Sometimes he's working up to ten o'clock. I haven't see him since Sunday."

She spoke hotly, for she knew that her family did not approve of Ted Arboys. They did not want her to marry somebody who kept a bicycle shop, even if he talked of turning it into a garage. They would have liked her, too, to marry somebody who lived nearer home, somebody in Copstreet. Rushmonden was quite three miles away.

Some time passed before Bess played again with Meg. The first week of the Laurelwoods' visit was always hectic with a process called "settling in." Even if she had not been going to school Bess would not have seen much of the family. They were busy visiting old haunts and meeting old friends. The very first day, Mr. Colenutt, the vicar, called as he did every year, and the next afternoon came Mr. Brown, the curate, as he had never done before, for he was new. Then Lady Mallender called, and after that came the parties—the Colenutts and the Mallenders eating fairy cakes and homemade

strawberry jam at Idolsfold, the Laurelwoods eating very much the same at the rectory and Morghew Hall.

Bess used to hear about all these social events when she ate her own tea after school.

"Have they been to Mr. Brown's?" asked Emmy.

"No," said Mother, "they'll never go there; and I noticed that when he came here he only saw Mr. Laurelwood."

"Why shouldn't he see Mrs. Laurelwood?" asked Dad—the men were having their tea early today and going out to the Maiden field afterward.

"Because she doesn't want to know *her*," said Mother.

"Why not?"

"You've only got to look at her to know why not," said Emmy.

Bess knew that they were talking about Mrs. Brown. She certainly was a very noticeable lady, and quite unlike any curate's wife Bess had ever seen—and she had seen a great many, for one of Mr. Colenutt's failings, people said, was that he was difficult to get on with and always changing his curates. Mrs. Brown made Bess think of a poppy; she always wore something red, and her mouth was red too—local opinion had decided that she "painted." She always wore big hats, and long tight skirts like Diana's. "Not at all the thing for a clergyman's wife" . . . "Never done any work in the parish" . . . "Always on the gad" . . . Those were the things that Mother and Emmy said, and there were others that they whispered.

"I think she's very pretty," said Dick.

"Don't be a silly mug," cried Emmy. "Any woman could look like that if she had rouge and powder and no shame."

"Come, come," said Dad. "Let's talk of something else. Little pitchers have long ears."

Bess knew that this meant her and was angry—not because she wanted to hear any more about Mrs. Brown, but because Dad thought she was interested in all that silly talk. Mother and Emmy were always talking about people like Mrs. Brown and Sir Charles Mallender and Mr. Colenutt and other gentry that they disapproved of for all sorts of different reasons. Sometimes Nanny Wheeler joined them and their heads and their tongues wagged together. They made a fuss about her not hearing some of the things they said, but she could not help knowing that they thought Mrs. Brown painted her face, that Sir Charles Mallender was "fast" and wasted his money on horses, that Mr. Colenutt neglected his parish: "there was no need for a curate at all, old Mr. Lovelace had always run

Rushmonden and Copstreet together and visited every house in the parish twice a year."

"Dick," she said, "I've got another brush painting to show you. It's a piece of gorse, very pretty, brown and yellow."

She went to get it out of her satchel, but Dad shouted at her:

"Now, don't you go wasting any more of Dick's time with those messes of yours. It's all very well for girls, but I don't like seeing a boy who's almost a man fooling about with a paintbrush."

"I don't fool about with a paintbrush," said Dick. "Nobody ever taught me even that much at school."

"And a good thing too. You're bad enough as it is without being taught painting."

Dad was always getting short with Dick because he liked pretty things like flowers and pictures and would rather moon about with them than work on the farm or enjoy himself in his free time watching cricket and football like Joe and Clarence.

"Mr. Laurelwood paints," she said, coming to the rescue of her favorite brother.

"Mr. Laurelwood is a gentleman," said Dad unanswerably.

Silence fell while they all munched. Then Dad went on: "When a gentleman retires from his work he likes to have a hobby, and till he retires he practices it in his holidays. Mr. Laurelwood is an uncommonly high-class solicitor"—dissociating Mr. Laurelwood from Mr. Turk of Rushmonden and Mr. Cramp of Meadmerry, who certainly were not in the least like him—"and it's only right that when he comes here on holiday he should have his painting as a-a-well, as a hobby."

"His father used to paint, too," said Granny Lardner. "Old Dr. Laurelwood, he used to paint such clever pictures. But his were mostly likenesses. He'd paint Miss Gertrude and Miss Elizabeth over and over again, and once he painted me—I was better worth painting then."

"Martin doesn't paint," said Clarence, "he says he wants to be a farmer when he grows up."

"I've told you, Clarence," said Mother, "you're not to call him Martin."

"And he's told me I am to. He says he hates being called Master."

"Well, your dad and I don't hold with such easy ways, and I don't suppose his father and mother do either."

"It's he who's got to call me Master," persisted Clarence. "I'm head of the gang."

Bess knew that Clarence was being indiscreet, and tried to change the conversation. Not that she approved of the way he and Dick and Martin went about together, pretending they were castaways on a desert island or palefaces hiding from Red Indians. But she was naturally on their side against her parents.

"Why doesn't Mr. Laurelwood paint likenesses?" she asked. "He might paint a picture of Miss Diana."

But Clarence ignored her intervention.

"Martin—I mean—*Master* Martin is coming out with us this evening to the Maiden. I've promised to show him how to use a spikall."

"It's no work for him," said Mother.

"But I've told you all he wants to be a farmer when he grows up."

"His father and mother will never allow that."

"Why?" asked Bess.

"Because he's got to be a solicitor like his father. There's that high-class family business waiting for him to step into."

"It's a high-class family business on both sides," said Granny. "Raikes and Laurelwood. I remember the day when Mr. Harry said to me: 'I've got a partnership in the firm now, Mrs. Lardner, and a partner too.'"

"What did he mean?" asked Bess.

"That he'd got a wife," said Emmy. "Don't you tell me now you didn't see that."

Then Dad called the boys off to work.

Bess was not enjoying the Laurelwood visit as much this year as usual. There had always been certain drawbacks—having to listen to all the silly talk about them, having to change her dress and brush her hair more often, having to do more housework, having to keep quiet. Also she had never cared much for anyone in the family except Meg. Diana was too old to notice her and Martin was a boy—a boy, moreover, who tagged about all day with her brothers and robbed her of their company. The baby was nothing but a nuisance watched over by a dragon. "Now, Bess, don't you play anywhere near the house this evening. I've just got Boy off to sleep."

But Meg had always been sufficient of herself to make a summer treat. In other years Bess had enjoyed going out with Meg, playing with Meg, showing off to Meg. This year, though the first "settling in" week was over, she had done scarcely any of these things. She

knew that it was her own fault—Meg would have been glad enough to play with her and would have joined her more than once in the garden or in the orchard or in the meadow if Bess had not seen her coming. She did not want to have to show her her toys. Those toys which in other years had been her proudest display had been robbed of their glory by that miserable doll. It was all because of that miserable doll that she could not enjoy Meg's society. It was true that Meg did not seem to play much with Veronique, but Bess felt sure that she would be produced if they were ever to be long together again. She had seen her carried off in state to show Maudie Colenutt at the vicarage and Bridget Malender at Morghew Hall. So she dodged about uncomfortably, and soon it became a habit—a habit that was not broken till the Laurelwoods had been at Idolsfold nearly a fortnight.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and Bess had been to Sunday school at Copstreet. Here there was a little chapel of ease—old, but not so old as the parish church at Rushmonden, and presided over by Mr. Brown in his inferior capacity as curate. Meg did not go to Sunday school; apparently the gentry never did, and Meg had always wanted to. Each Sunday afternoon had held its little triumph as Bess strolled off to Copstreet, after watching a reluctant Meg set out with her mother or Nanny Wheeler for the more genteel but infinitely less alluring children's service at Rushmonden. When they met on her return it had always been: "What did you do this afternoon? Who was there? Did you win a picture?" with envious admiration for any prey Bess had contrived to snatch by way of the Kings of Israel and Judah or the Minor Prophets.

This Sunday the Laurelwood party was going in at the garden gate just as Bess came swinging over the stile from the lane at Boldshaves.

"Hullo, Bess. Have you been to Sunday school?"

"Yes. I'm in Miss Eland's class this year."

"Have you won a prize today?"

Bess showed her a small picture about the size of a postage stamp.

"Who's that?"

"I dunno. Somebody holy, I reckon."

"Will you put it in your Bible with the others?"

Bess nodded.

"Oh, Bess, do let me see your toys."

Bess nodded again, with a softened heart.

"You come round when you've had your tea. It's ready now—there's your mother calling."



When she had had her own tea she went into her room and dusted the table and its display very carefully with her handkerchief. Her things did not really look bad now that the memory of Veronique had grown less painfully clear. She suffered a moment's pang when she thought that Meg might bring the doll with her this evening, but was comforted when she remembered that Mrs. Laurelwood had forbidden her to play with it out of doors. Soon she was completely reassured by Meg's appearance empty-handed.

The two little girls met in the garden, for it was a long-established rule that no Laurelwood entered the old part except accompanied by a Lardner. The custom dated from a dreadful occasion when Diana, then four years old, had been lost for a whole afternoon and found at last in Mrs. Lardner's bedroom sitting on her chamber pot. Lardners could go at will into the new part, to dust and sweep, to carry food and hot water, but Laurelwoods could never leave high ceilings for low except under escort. It was another of those advantages which only Bess took count of.

This Sunday evening the sunshine was her friend, slanting in through the open door and lighting up her pictures so that the flames seemed to kindle into real fire and the blood to shine as if it was just going to drip down the wall. On the table the beam lay like the beam of a magic lantern, creating a fairyland of reds and blues and greens and silver and gold.

Meg gave a loud gasp of admiration.

"Oh, Bess, how lovely! Is this your bird?"

Bess nodded, well pleased. After all, the possession of Veronique had not spoiled Meg's appetite. She stood gazing and fingering, picking up first one toy and then another. Some she had seen before, though Bess's toys were short-lived by nature; others were new to her, and Bess watched her changing delights, and wondered which in the end would claim them most. Meg had a queer way of picking out what she herself least valued. She had once lost her heart to a set of colored ninepins which Bess set so little store by that it had been a cheap purchase of pride to give them to her.

"Well," she encouraged, "how do you like 'em?"

"I think they're wonderful." Meg fingered a tiny perambulator made of tin, with a yellow body, green wheels and a crimson hood. "Did you buy that at Mrs. Austin's?"

"Yes. Mostly all the penny ones come from there."

"I must go and see what she's got. Is that a new watch?"

"New the day you came—I bought it then."

Meg picked up the watch and wound it. Evidently she had not

expected to do more than make the hands go round, and when the procession of cocks and hens and farmyard beasts began to move across the shutter she gave a squeal of delight.

"Oh, Bess! Bess! I've never seen anything so lovely. Oh, do look at the dear little animals! Did you get *this* at Mrs. Austin's? Did *this* only cost a penny?"

"No, this was twopence."

"I must see if I can get one too."

"She hadn't another."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. She brought out all she'd got in the place and I chose this one."

Bess's heart soared in triumph. Meg was still sending the little procession round. You would never think she was the owner of a life-size doll whose clothes took off and on and were all handmade. Her eyes were fixed on the watch and her mouth was a little open.

"Oh, Bess . . ."

She wants me to give it to her, thought Bess, but I won't—never. Nothing would persuade her to part with the toy which had so wonderfully restored her to her lost self-esteem. Thank goodness she had bought it and not the raspberry fizz! But she had never expected Meg to be so made up with the watch. She had expected her to fancy rather Granny's bird or the little painted milk cart. Meg was silly to be so made up with a twopenny watch. But undoubtedly she was made up, and with her making up all the old delights of a Laurelwood summer visit came back to Bess's heart.

"Careful," she said, "don't you wind it too hard or you'll bust it."

Meg stood looking at the treasure in her hand. Perhaps she was hoping. . . . Bess's hand, so much bigger than hers for all she was the shorter, came down and closed over it, taking it away.

"We'd better go out now. It's getting late—near your bedtime."

It was the end of the trouble and uneasiness which for a fortnight had stood like a wall between them, keeping them apart. They met as often as in other summers and played as much. Bess made things easier by choosing a kind of play in which a doll had no place. There was a little stream at the bottom of the orchard, called the dick because it was no more than a ditch really, though alive with a trickle in all but the driest weather. Bess's idea was that they should divert its course, or rather dig a tributary to

form a pool under the knoll of the old pear tree. Having achieved a harbor they would build a boat, which meant that the boys would make them one out of a piece of wood and her paints. Indeed, the whole scheme was designed to attract the boys, otherwise so remote in their summer gang. But up to the time of harvest it had disappointingly failed to interest them.

The dick was not deep or dirty or wet enough to rouse opposition from Mrs. Laurelwood and Nanny Wheeler. Meg's skirts were bundled into the protection of mackintosh waders, but that was all. Only sometimes Mrs. Laurelwood, coming out to watch them, would lament their fancy for such a queer ungirlish game.

"Why don't you play with your doll, Meg?"

"You said I wasn't to play with her out of doors."

"I don't mind, if you take great care and stop in the front garden."

"I don't want to stop in the front garden. It's much nicer here."

It seemed to Bess that Meg's devotion to Veronique was hardly what her own would have been. Not only was she content with play in which Veronique could have no share, but on wet evenings, when obliged to stay indoors, she chose to play in Bess's room with Bess's toys. This was all very well as far as it went, but Meg's desire to have the twopenny watch for her own was now becoming a nuisance. She was always fingering it and hinting—more than hinting.

"It's a pity Mrs. Austin hasn't got another one in the shop. She said she might be having one in a few weeks, but I'll be gone by then. If I had this watch I expect you could get another one for yourself at Mrs. Austin's."

"Maybe she'll have it before you go."

"I don't think so. She said it wouldn't be till she'd been into Folkestone, and she doesn't go till November when she buys her Christmas toys. I shan't be here then, but you will, Bess."

"Reckon I will. I'm always here."

"Well, you could buy it if I left you the money."

"And send it to you by post?"

"I didn't mean that—I mean for yourself. If you let me have yours now."

"I guess it isn't all that certain that Mrs. Austin will have another watch—not exactly like this."

She wasn't all that set on the watch, but she wasn't going to give it up to Meg. That would mean losing the power and the glory, returning to her old longing for that beautiful doll, which she

could forget only because its owner preferred this thing of hers. "Thou shalt not covet." She had learned that in Sunday school. It was one of the Ten Commandments. If she did not keep the watch she would covet Veronique and so there was no good anyone thinking it would be kind and unselfish of her to give it to Meg. You couldn't do both—give up the watch and not covet the doll. It was too much for anyone, even God, to expect of you.

That summer was a wet one. The dick ran all through it and made quite a notable puddle under the old pear tree. Toward the middle of August the Laurelwoods began to show signs of anxiety about the harvest. This was not due so much to their interest in farming or their sympathy with the Lardners, who suffered the same qualms, as to a fear that the weather might spoil one of their annual treats.

Every year they had two treats. One was a visit to Folkestone, to see Mr. Laurelwood's aunt, and dated back no further than his father's death in 1899. Before that old Dr. Laurelwood had always joined the party at Idolsfold and the house at Folkestone was shut up. The harvest treat was of much earlier origin. Mr. Laurelwood had been only a little boy when his father first took him out into the cornfields to see the reaping. After that the family had made a sort of picnic of it every year. Master Harry had been joined by Miss Gertrude and Miss Elizabeth, and after a time by their school-fellow Miss Frances Raikes. Then Master Harry had married Miss Frances and they had become the new Laurelwood parents who brought their children to play in the stubble, while the reaper trundled slowly through the cornstalks, and to imagine that they helped tie up the sheaves.

It was for them a substitute for haymaking, which they would have enjoyed much more and in which their assistance would have been more eagerly welcomed, but which unfortunately took place at least a month before they arrived. For the Lardners it had always been the one shadow on their visit—their presence during quite the busiest, most anxious fortnight of the year. The mere necessity of feeding and waiting on them, with so much extra work to do and extra workers to feed, would have been bad enough without their well-meant activities in the harvest field. But no Lardner would ever dream of hinting at this difficulty or suggesting that it could be reduced by their keeping as much as possible out of the way. So every summer Laurelwood anticipation and Lardner foreboding ripened with the wheat.

Bess had very little concern in either. Her farming interests centered in the hop-picking, for which she was released from school. She was too young to be of any real use in the fields, and though she was always invited with the other Lardners to the Laurelwoods' harvest picnic, this did not rank in pleasure with the treat of going with them to Folkestone, which she hoped would be hers this year as it had been last year and the year before.

When she came home from school her free time was spent mostly indoors, helping her mother and Emmy to wait on the family while Rosie Boorman worked with the harvesters. There was a lot of work to do, because of the extra meals, but even so Mother did not prevent her going to play with Meg in the orchard, since it kept the latter out of the cornfields where she was nothing but a nuisance.

It was on one of these occasions that Meg made her startling suggestion.

"Bess," she said suddenly, as they squatted over harbor works of mud and moss, "would you sell me your watch for a shilling?"

"Oh." For a moment Bess was too surprised to answer. Who would ever think of paying a shilling for a twopenny watch?

"I've saved up my pocket money for two weeks now," continued Meg, "and there's nothing else I want to buy. Oh, please, Bess, let me have your watch."

Bess frowned. The offer was a good one on the face of it, but not so good as it looked. If she gave up the watch she had a shilling—true; but she no longer had anything that Meg wanted, she lost her advantage over Meg, her answer to the beautiful doll. There was nothing that she herself wanted badly except that doll, which a shilling, or even, she suspected, twenty shillings, could never buy. A water pistol, a boat with a sail, a box of wooden soldiers—all these were things she wouldn't mind having and all were to be had for a shilling, but none was worth as much as the twopenny watch, since none would give her the same feelings of pride and power. She shook her head.

"No, I am not selling that watch for any money."

Meg pleaded, argued, finally sulked, but Bess was not to be moved. "And 'a done, do, pestering me about that old watch. I'm sick of the very sound of it."

"Then why not let me have it?"

Bess said nothing.

They played on silently, scooping out their little bay, lining the

banks with moss and planting little flowers in it out of the orchard grass. After a time the normal exchanges of the game began again, the stiffness vanished, and the stillness. The watch seemed forgotten. But it was only a seeming, for when Nanny Wheeler called Meg out of the window to come indoors she said in a trembling voice:

"Please, Bess, don't be cross with me, but may I just look at the watch before I go upstairs?"

You could not help being pleased, even though she was so silly—pleased that you had not bought the raspberry fizz, that you had not promised to sell the watch for a shilling.

"All right. We'll go and have a look at it."

There was no sunshine today. The colored pictures and the colored toys lay in a pool of cold, gray light. But evidently the watch's beauty was not made of sunshine. Meg picked it up and wound it, counting the animals as they went by. "They're twelve," she said. Then she added without any warning, and just as if she was saying something quite ordinary except that her voice shook a little: "If you'll give me that watch I'll give you Veronique in exchange."

For a moment Bess was speechless.

"Oh, Bess, I know you'd love her—I wasn't sure myself that I could give her to you until I'd had another look at the watch. Her clothes are simply wonderful, and her voice, the way she says 'Mamma,' is so natural that once when I was working her and Maudie Colenutt was in the next room she thought it was a real baby."

"But what—what would your mother say? She'd never allow you."

"She won't know anything about it. I keep her in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe, so that she can't get dirty. There's nothing else in there except my thick combinations and I'm not likely to be wearing them this summer, so Nanny won't notice she's gone."

Even to Bess's besotted mind there were flaws in the scheme, but she would not look at them. Desire had outstripped judgment, even reason.

"All right, then. If you give her to me you can have the watch."

Meg clapped her hands.

"May I take it now?"

"No, not till I've got her."

"I'll fetch her at once."

"You can't—your Nanny's there. I'll have to think . . ."

It was one of the drawbacks of the Laurelwood occupation that she had not a room to herself. She had had to give up her old room to Diana and turn in with Emmy, just as Clarence had had to give up his to Martin and turn in with Dick. It was a nuisance for she now had no place where she could safely keep her treasure in the house.

"Oh, do let me get her, Bess. I expect Nanny's gone out to look for me as I haven't come. I do so want that watch tonight."

"You must wait. I'm thinking."

There was a shout from the kitchen.

"Bess, Bess, where are you?"

Her mother appeared in the doorway, looking tired and flustered. "Oh, there you are, Miss Meg. I've been right down the meadow after you. Your Nanny wants you to come upstairs for your bath. She says she saw you playing with Bess in the orchard, but you disappeared. I've been right down the meadow as far as the lodge."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lardner. It was my fault—I wanted to look at Bess's toys. Please tell Nanny I'll come in five minutes."

"You'd better go at once, Miss Meg, or the water will be cold. Emmy took it up a quarter of an hour ago."

Seeing that they were not to be left alone, Meg moved slowly and reluctantly toward the door.

"Bess, you'll let me have it tomorrow."

"Yes, I'll have finished it by then and tomorrow's Saturday—we can play in the morning."

She wanted to push Meg out of the room before she should give them both away.

I'll keep her in the little old lodge, thought Bess. Nobody ever goes there now.

There was a lodge in the corner of the horse field, down by Clearhedge Wood. It was falling to pieces and unfit for use. Dad talked of repairing it for the winter, but he certainly would not begin the work for some time yet, not till after the harvest and the hop-picking, not till the weather changed, till the Laurelwoods were gone. By then she would be back in her own room, with a safe indoor hiding place for Veronique.

The lodge let in the rain. But I'll build her a grotto, thought Bess. She was very fond of building grottoes, indeed a grotto, beautifully decorated with wild flowers and with shells brought specially from Folkestone Beach, had been her last year's play with Meg. She

decided to abandon the orchard harbor-works for a truly wonderful and especial grotto, worthy to be the home of Veronique. Nobody would take any notice of their playing in the meadow instead of the orchard, and Veronique could be housed safely and worthily in a corner of the little old lodge, where nobody came or would come till the autumn months.

The great exchange was made. There was no reason for Meg to keep her part of it secret, for in the past Bess had often given her toys. Veronique was successfully sneaked out of her drawer and established in very different surroundings. The lodge was dark and empty. "I hope she won't be cold. I durn't take anything warm out of the house to wrap her in, but I've got some silver paper that'll keep her clean."

For a whole day they were busy building the grotto, with stones and moss and flowers and some shells left over from last year.

"I'll get her some more shells when we go to Folkestone. I reckon I'll be coming with you again this year, won't I, Meg?"

"Oh, yes, I'll ask Mother specially for you to come."

"We could bring some sand too and make a liddle shore. I'll write her name in it with shells. She isn't going to be called Veronique any more. She's Mathilda now she's mine."

"But Mathilda's an English name and she's French."

"Not any more now she's mine. Mathilda Lardner, that's her name. I'm her mother."

Her ownership of Mathilda was very firm. Meg was not allowed to undress her and scarcely ever to hold her.

"If you're the mother, mayn't I be the nurse?"

"No, you're the servant. She hasn't got a nurse. What you do is to bring the water for her bath. You'll find it in the horsepond."

They gave Mathilda only one bath, for the water seemed to make her dirty instead of clean. When evening came they left her lying on a cushion of moss covered with silver paper, another sheet of paper over her. The lodge had been empty for so long that Bess did not think there could be any mice.

But when darkness had fallen she slipped out of the house and ran down the field just to make sure. A big moon was climbing out of Clearhedge Wood, and its light streamed through the cracks and chinks of the lodge. Lifting the silvery sheet she was able to see Mathilda lying there on the moss, her eyes closed as if she were.



asleep like a real baby—in the wavering moonlight she almost seemed to breathe.

Bess gathered her up in her arms, strained her to her, rocked her and crooned over her. For nearly half an hour she sat there in ecstasy—she could have stayed there all night if she had not feared an outcry and a search at bedtime. It was lucky that the weather was fine, so that Emmy stopped out late most nights with her Ted Arboys, and that Mother was too tired to notice much or to bother about anything.

The fine weather lasted through the harvest. It would have been better if it had come a week earlier, so that at least half of three fields should not have been beaten flat. But even so it was merciful, and to no one apparently more than to the Laurelwoods, who rejoiced that their picnic could now take place in all its glory. The whole Lardner family was invited to tea. Only the farm men and the casual workers were not gathered into the social pause which broke up field labor, often most inconveniently, round about four o'clock.

The procession always appeared at the same time from the same quarter in the same order. Mrs. Laurelwood carried the spirit lamp, Mr. Laurelwood the picnic basket, Nanny Wheeler pushed the baby carriage, and then came Martin, Diana and Meg with cushions to sit upon, a mackintosh ground-sheet, a tablecloth and supplementary bags and plates.

It took them some time to settle themselves and still longer—often very long indeed—to light the spirit lamp and boil the kettle. But sooner or later the hand bell would ring and Mr. Lardner, Joe, Dick and Clarence would roll down their shirt sleeves, while Mrs. Lardner, Granny Lardner, Emmy and Bess came forward from the hedge under which they had been waiting.

The men always felt a little awkward because they were to sit down with the gentry without having washed or changed, while the women had been tidying themselves in the house for the last half hour. This was supposed, however, to be an informal occasion, and to put their guests at their ease all the Laurelwoods wore their oldest clothes. This year it was noticeable that Miss Diana not only wore her old cycling skirt, which was short enough to show her legs halfway to the knee, but that she had let down her hair into a big brush between her shoulders, so that she no longer looked a grand, grown-up lady but the schoolgirl she was last year.

Bess always enjoyed the picnic, because there were so many good things to eat, and often Mrs. Laurelwood gave her a parcel of what was left to take home. There was a big iced cake, specially ordered every year from Quentin's in Rushmonden, with "Harvest Home" written on it in sugar letters and a little sugar cornsheaf on the top. There was a melon too and chocolate biscuits, as well as a great many little cakes.

Afterward there would be lemonade to drink when she grew hot racing about the field with Meg. Altogether the pleasures of the afternoon outweighed such pains as were involved in having to spend at least a part of it on her best behavior.

But this year Mrs. Laurelwood suddenly opened her mouth and spoiled it all.

"Meg," she said, "I thought you were going to bring your new doll to the picnic."

"Oh," said Meg.

Her eyes darted across the tablecloth at Bess, beseeching help from the very person more in need of it than she was.

"I told you you could bring her out this afternoon. Did you forget?"

Meg mumbled something that might have been Yes.

"What a funny little girl you are. I'm sure if Veronique belonged to Bess she would take her everywhere she went. However, never mind."

She shut her mouth firmly to show that she was not going to scold Meg, because it was a picnic and they were all there to enjoy themselves. But Bess could see she was displeased, and in her own heart was a creeping discomfort. She realized that the joys of owning Mathilda could not remain forever undisturbed. For the first time she had to face the future and consider hard facts. Sooner or later the doll's absence must be discovered. Meg could not avoid that bottom drawer forever; and then . . .

"What shall we do?" she whispered desperately as they went out into the field after tea. But Meg's only reply was an echo: "What shall we do?"

Hard common sense dictated that Mathilda should be put back in her proper place before her absence was discovered. But even now, with all her fears awakened, Bess could not yield to common sense. Some way of keeping her prize must be found, she would think of it in time, and meanwhile there was still the secret place where she and Meg played every afternoon and where in the darkness she played alone. With luck there would still be many more

of those happy hours when she was the lady with a dear little girl and Meg was the servant who was not allowed to touch her, only to fetch and carry, to dust and sweep; and there would be many more of those hours more precious still when she sat alone, hugging her darling baby in her arms, not proud, not showing off, just cuddling and loving.

"I hope Mummy won't want me to take her to the Mallenders on Thursday," said Meg.

"Do you think she will?"

"I'm 'fraid so, after this afternoon. I took her last time—Bridget's seen her—but this is to be a party. Look here, Bess. Do you think you could lend her to me, just for that once?"

"We'll see," said Bess nervously, "when the time comes."

"It really would be best; then perhaps Mummy wouldn't bother for quite a bit. But of course when we go home . . ."

Meg's common sense did not have such odds to fight against as Bess's. She was beginning to see all their difficulties. Bess felt quite angry with her.

"If she ever goes back to you," she said furiously, "I take back the watch."

"Oh."

"Well, it's only fair. But I don't want the watch—I want to keep Mathilda. Listen, I've thought of something."

Her eyes had fallen on a colored group at the edge of the field. It was the Ripley family, a set of gypsies, who came every year to help with the harvest at Idolsfold and then went north into the shires.

"If your mother or your Nanny look in that drawer and find she isn't there we can say that the gypsies have stolen her."

"So we can."

"I reckon a gypsy 'ud steal a doll just the same as a baby. There was a gypsy woman walked off with a baby at Ashford market last year—took it right out of its pram, and I don't know as it was ever found again. Everyone 'ull know that the Ripleys have been here and we can make them think they've taken Mathilda."

"But won't the police go after them to get her back? Mummy is sure to send them."

"They'll never catch up with the Ripleys—they go right into the shires. I'm not meaning to say anything now—not till your mother finds out she's gone, and then it'll be too late to do anything about it."

This solution pleased them both, and the rest of the afternoon

passed happily, with satisfying potions of lemonade and at the end a lurching, toppling ride home on the harvest cart.

When darkness fell Bess was able to slip down as usual to the little old lodge. All through supper she had been living for the moment of reunion—she had been as impatient to go out to Mathilda as Emmy to her Ted Arboys. Somehow she could not rid herself of the thought that Mathilda had been in danger. She wanted to reassure herself with the touch of her, the smell of her—which was increasingly a smell of moss—the feel of her in her arms.

As she ran down the meadow in the queer yellow light of the moon she had a sudden terrible fear that perhaps it was true that the Ripleys had stolen her. Certainly they would have if they had known where she was, and Jemima and Laura were always prowling about. She ran so fast through the meadow grass that she could hardly stop herself when she caught sight of something that turned her fear for Mathilda into another fear. There at the bottom of the field, right under the lodge wall, were Emmy and Ted Arboys, making love. They were on the dark side, where the shadow lay—she could see no more of them than a combined shape—but if she went into the lodge they would certainly hear her. So she must wait till they chose to move, which might not be for hours.

She crept down as far as the hedge and huddled into the ditch. She had only a slight and contemptuous knowledge of lovemaking, but she knew that it was liable to take a long time. Emmy often did not come in till quite late, after Dad had begun to grumble and look at his watch. What would he say if Bess were to come in later still? She must have at least a few minutes with Mathilda. It was mean of Emmy and Ted to have chosen this place when they had the whole farm—lodges, fields and woods to choose from.

Then suddenly an awful thought possessed her—a truly awful thought. Suppose Emmy and Ted should find the night too cold or the grass too wet for sitting out of doors and go into the lodge itself . . . they would be able to see Mathilda in the moonlight. Bess's heart bumped. She would have to find a new hiding place—but where? No hole or corner was safe from lovers. Oh, what should she do? It seemed only a matter of days or hours now before her secret would be discovered. She clenched her fists under her chin as the angry, frightened tears rinsed her eyes.

Then she saw a welcome sight—the lovers were moving. Two dark shapes stood upright in the shadow. She was not near enough

to hear what they said, but probably they found the grass too wet—Emmy was brushing the dew off her skirt. Queer, though, she did not look like Emmy. Her hair was all loose—and could that be Ted? He didn't seem tall enough. Then the two shapes suddenly became one again—seemed to remain one for an outrageously long time. If it wasn't Ted and Emmy it must be some other couple just as silly and far gone. Bess watched impatiently, knowing that even the longest kiss must end; and this one did at last. They did not come out into the field and for a moment she was terrified that they were going to sit down again, but instead they moved along the edge of the wood toward the next field, which had been cleared that afternoon and now stood empty and golden in the moonlight.

As soon as they were far enough off to make it safe Bess dashed into the lodge and found her darling.

"Oh, Mathilda, Mathilda, my own darling baby—now at last I've got you."

She hugged Mathilda in her arms and rocked her to and fro.

"Oh, I've been so anxious about you. I thought maybe Jemima or Laura might have stolen you. Gypsies do steal children, you know. Now, I'm going to give you a bath, for it's light enough for me to see that you are very dirty. The girl isn't here to fetch the water, but I don't mind managing for myself once in a while. Now let me take off your pretty dress—"

She broke off and almost stopped breathing, for a shadow had blocked the moonlight in the doorway, and there right in front of her stood Emmy.

"Bess, what *are* you doing?"

So it couldn't have been her and Ted before—they couldn't have turned round and come back in so short a time. But here they were now, both of them, standing before her in the moonlight, watching her as she sat with the doll in her arms.

"What have you got there?" said Emmy. "Why, it's Miss Meg's doll!"

Bess strained Mathilda wildly to her bosom but was speechless.

"What on earth are you doing, playing with it down here? You've no business to be playing with that doll at all. You're a naughty girl. Here, give it to me."

But Bess only clutched tighter in a frenzy of possession.

"Meg gave her to me," she cried. "Meg gave her to me."

Luckily Ted Arboys was there, or Emmy would have been much angrier.

"You're a very naughty girl," she said. "Come along now—it's time you were in bed."

"I tell you Meg did give her to me."

"We'll go into that later," said Emmy, obviously not believing her, "but you must come home now. We'll take her back to the house, Ted, and then I'll walk with you as far as the drive gate."

Ted obviously wanted to be kind and tickled Bess's ear under her hair as they walked up the field. But she had begun to cry and could not stop crying. She was crying loudly when Emmy led her into the house, and when her sister began to explain to Dad and Mother, who were alone in the kitchen, how she had found her down by Clearhedge, playing with the doll all alone in the broken old lodge, she cried louder than ever on purpose to deaden the story to her own ears.

"Now, Bess," said Dad, "what's the meaning of this? How did you get hold of Miss Meg's doll?"

"She—she—gug—gave her to me."

"Now don't you go telling lies on the top of it all, or things 'ull be worse for you and not better."

"You'll never make us believe Miss Meg would give you a doll like that," said Mother, "a doll she's set such store on and was brought her specially from Paris. Why, her clothes— Oh, just look at the state she's in. Oh, Bess, you naughty, naughty girl," and Mother who was nearly crying herself took her by the shoulder and shook her.

"How long have you had that doll down there in the lodge?" asked Emmy.

"Only since Meg gave her to me—ab-b-bout a week."

"Well, Miss Meg's in bed now so we can't ask her, but tomorrow we'll find out exactly what's happened."

"I tell you she gave her to me," cried Bess, nearly stifled with anger and grief. "She's mine. She's mine. Let me hold her—she's mine."

"I'd better have her things off at once and wash them through," said Mother. "I can't let Miss Meg see her in that state. Poor little dear, what will she think? She was that proud of her."

"I'll help you," said Emmy, "or we'll never get done tonight. Ted, I'm sorry I can't come out again, but this wretched child has given us another two hours' work on the top of everything."

"All right, I'll get out of your way, then," said Ted, but before he went he tickled Bess's ear.

In the midst of so much ill will she might have been grateful for a little kindness, but she wasn't. Ted's hand seemed to be the one thing in the world she hated most, and swinging round on him she smacked it with all her strength. Whereupon Dad reached forward and boxed her ears, and the kitchen was once more full of scolding and crying.

The next morning things happened in a very solemn way. Bess was kept back from school till her mother had been to see Mrs. Laurelwood, which she did directly after breakfast, carrying the doll. Then, after what seemed a long time, Bess was sent for. She found both Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood in the visitors' sitting room, with Mother and a very unhappy-looking Meg. Mathilda was there too, with her clothes washed—also a little shrunk, because Mother and Emmy had been in a hurry and very tired.

"Bess," said Mrs. Laurelwood in a sad voice, "what is this I hear?"

Bess began to cry again, though by this time she was rather tired of crying.

"I trusted you," continued Mrs. Laurelwood in the same sad voice. "I trusted you to play with Meg, but you have shown me you are not to be trusted."

Bess's head shot up and she looked straight at Meg, for it struck her suddenly that perhaps Meg had not taken her share of the blame. It must be as wicked to give away Mathilda as it was to be given her.

"You gave her to me," she challenged.

"I know," answered Mrs. Laurelwood before Meg could speak. "She has owned that she was naughty enough to give you a doll in exchange for a penny watch, but do you—"

"It was twopence."

"Don't interrupt, dear. Do you think that a doll costing many pounds and specially brought from Paris is a fair exchange for a toy watch costing a penny—or twopence, it makes no difference—at the village shop?"

Here Meg broke in.

"But I wanted the watch, Mummy. I've told you a hundred times—I wanted it more than the doll. I asked Bess for it and offered her Veronique in exchange."

"That shows you're quite unfit to have such a lovely toy. If you don't know the value of a doll like that . . . Why didn't you offer to buy the watch from Bess if you wanted it so much?"

"I did. I offered her a shilling, but she wouldn't take it."

There was an appalled silence of both Lardners and Laurelwoods. Mrs. Laurelwood turned pink.

"I think you ought to be ashamed of yourselves, both of you—bargaining over your toys like that when we thought you were playing together."

Mr. Laurelwood said something about Jews, and seemed to think it rather funny.

"No, not Jews," said Mrs. Laurelwood, "for they don't seem to know the value of anything. At least Meg doesn't—I'm not so sure about Bess."

"Bess," said her mother, "I'm ashamed of you."

"I never interfered with your games," continued Mrs. Laurelwood. "I let you play anywhere you liked—right away from the house and garden. But now I'm afraid I must make a rule that you are not to play with each other unless Nanny is there or I am."

That would make it no fun at all, and both little girls faced each other with expressions of misery.

"Now, Bess, you had better run away to school, and when you come back in the evening, if you are good girls, I'll play a game of halma with you."

"Thank you very much, mum, I'm sure." That was Mother speaking. She tweaked Bess's arm to make her go, but Bess stood her ground. She was not going to let the matter end there.

"I want my watch back."

"Come along at once, you naughty girl."

"I want my watch back. I gave it to Meg in exchange for Mathilda and now I haven't got Mathilda I want my watch."

Mother was very angry, but Mrs. Laurelwood said: "Of course Bess must have her watch. Where is it, Meg?"

"But, Mummy," Meg's face became crimson and her eyes, which had been quite dry till now, swum suddenly in tears, "Mummy, I don't want . . . Oh, Mummy I *must* keep it."

"Not if Bess gave it to you in exchange for the doll."

"I'm sure Bess can let her have the watch, mum," said Mother, who was beginning to look as much upset as either of the little girls. "She can buy another with her Saturday's penny."

"Not like this—it cost twopence, and Mrs. Austin hasn't got another. I want my watch."

"Go upstairs at once and fetch it, Meg."

"No, Mummy—no, no, no. Please let me keep it—let her have



the doll. I'd far rather she had the doll and I kept the watch. I don't want the doll—oh, please let me give it back to Bess."

For some reason this seemed to make both the Laurelwood parents very angry.

"You're a naughty little girl and don't deserve to have any toys at all," said Mrs. Laurelwood, turning quite red. While Mr. Laurelwood pointed to the door and said in a loud voice, unlike his own—more like Dad's—"Go upstairs at once and fetch that watch. Do you hear? Go!"

Meg went, crying loudly, and Bess felt a little sorry for her, but not much. Some moments passed which Mother spent apologizing: "I wouldn't have had this happen for worlds, mum, but I'm so busy now, with all the extra hands and the extra work and the men coming in at all hours and what not, that I can't keep a proper eye on Bess. And I did think she was to be trusted, and I'm sure she might let Miss Meg have that watch and welcome. It seems hard on her she should have to give it up when she sets such store by it."

"She must give it up," said Mr. Laurelwood. "She must learn to play fair."

Meg came running downstairs, making all the noise she could. She burst open the door, rushed into the room and threw the watch at Bess. "There's your old watch."

The watch just missed Bess's ear, hit the wall and fell to the ground in pieces. The back was off and the front was off, and the winding-knob and the little colored strip of animals were lying loose on the carpet.

"You beast!" screamed Bess. "You dirty beast!" And she fell upon Meg, pommeling her with her fists. Meg pommelled back, and soon they were both rolling together on the ground, pulling each other's hair.

Such a scene had never been witnessed since Lardners and Laurelwoods first met. The grown-up people managed in the end to tear the two little girls apart, but it was not easy, for they were both working off a rage far greater than anything they could feel against each other. At last they stood face to face in the grip of their parents.

"Pig!" shouted Meg. "Pig!"

"Beast! Sow! Cow! Bitch!" shouted Bess, and spat.

Mother was crying now.

"Her father shall beat her for this."

Mrs. Laurelwood was not crying, but she was trembling all over. "Meg, go upstairs to bed at once."

Meg went out of the room, bellowing, and Bess was led off for Dad to beat, if he could be found.

Perhaps, after all this, it was rather simple of Bess to expect to be taken to Folkestone this year. But a week had passed, during which her own attitude to the affair had changed considerably, and she was surprised and heartbroken to find that Mrs. Laurelwood's had not changed too.

"I don't see why I shouldn't go," she sobbed as the family drove off to the station. "She said I'm not to play with Meg unless she or Nanny Wheeler's there, and they'll both be there at Folkestone."

"You've shown yourself," said her mother, "quite unfit to associate with a young lady. The words you used—I blush to think of them. And spitting out of your mouth—Mrs. Laurelwood will never, never forgive that."

"I don't care if she forgives me or not, but I want to go to Folkestone. If I don't go, Meg shouldn't go. She was just as naughty as me—naughtier, because she broke my watch and I didn't break her doll."

"Really, Bess, sometimes you drive me almost out of my wits!"

"I've been looking forward all the summer to going to Folkestone—it's mean of them not to take me. And I didn't use such very bad words—not nearly so bad as some."

Her mother only sighed.

It was a beautiful day, with a hot sun in a thick blue sky, the sort of day to make you long for sea breezes and think of the golden beach with the waves creeping up it, and all the donkeys—last year Bess had had a donkey ride—and the ice-cream sellers and the pierrots and the men who drew pictures in the sand. To crown all, it was a holiday, for though the hop-picking had not started yet at Idolsfold it had begun at Clearhedge and Pigeon Hoo and Plurenden and other sheltered farms; so the school was closed and there would have been no trouble at all about her missing it to go to Folkestone. She almost wished she was at school—she wouldn't have so much of this feeling of being left behind. It was miserable wandering around at home with the Laurewoods away, knowing where they had gone and that she might have gone with them if only they hadn't been so unkind.

There was something wrong with Idolsfold too. Whenever she

stopped thinking about herself she was aware of it. Mother wasn't upset only on her account, and Dad's grumblings and Granny's head-shakings and Emmy's head-tossings had a different source from those of a week ago. She thought that she knew the reason. She was nearly sure that Dick had got drunk last night. He had gone out with Joe, which he had never done before, and she had heard a lot of noise when he came in after she was in bed; in the end it had sounded as if someone was being carried upstairs. She had heard him being sick, too—at least, she guessed that it was Dick and not Joe, because he had stopped in bed all morning, whereas Joe had appeared as usual, but looking rather sheepish. If she had had any pity to spare for herself she would have been sorry for Dick.

But misery had hardened her heart and as she prowled about the yard and fields her thoughts dwelt only on her own trouble. She could not even find comfort in its accustomed source. Granny had failed signally on this occasion—in fact she had been, if anything, more unkind than Mother.

"Never in all my born days did I hear of such a thing—never did I hear of one of us Lardners quarreling with one of the Laurels, hitting and spitting at a young lady like Miss Meg Laurelwood. Not even your Uncle Sid would have done a thing like that, though he had a sharp temper, and I wouldn't say that Master Harry was never provoking."

"But, Granny, she broke my watch."

"She shouldn't have done that, I allow. But it was for her mother to notice it, not you. Hitting and spitting and using tur'ble, ordinary words. I never heard the like of it. In all my days I never heard of such a thing."

"Oh, Granny, I'm so unhappy."

"Well, you deserve to be, my dear—hitting and spitting at a young lady. You don't know your place. Those were Joe Morris' very words when I told him. 'She don't know her place,' he said, and she'll have to larn it."

The long hours crawled slowly through the heat. Dinnertime came without much refreshment, for the pudding was burned. Mother and Emmy had been busy all the morning cleaning out the new part and had thought Rosie Boorman was attending to it, whereas Rosie, through some misunderstanding had been attending to the wash. Mother had scolded her and they could hear her loud sniffs coming from the kitchen as they sat eating. Everyone

was very silent and rather cross—more than a burned pudding seemed to justify. Dick had not come down yet, and when Bess asked what he was doing Dad jumped on her: “Don’t you pester me about Dick.”

“Well, it’s one comfort,” said Granny, “that they’ve gone to Folkestone.”

This was such a queer thing for Granny to say that Bess stopped eating to ponder it, and for the first time that day she did not cry when Folkestone was mentioned.

After dinner she went into the orchard, thinking that perhaps she would go on with the pool and the harbor. But the sides had fallen in since she and Meg last had played there—there was nothing but a choked puddle which did not seem worth putting back into shape. She and Meg would never again play under the old pear tree, for Nanny Wheeler did not fancy sitting out in the orchard. Not that she wanted to play any more with Meg, for, to her mind, Meg had cheated and come out of their joint misadventure much the better of the two. It was true that she had been sent to bed, while Bess had had only a few whacks that had scarcely hurt at all, but she still had her doll, whereas Bess had lost her watch, and now she was enjoying herself at the seaside, while Bess was wandering miserably alone at home.

She wondered if Meg had taken Mathilda to Folkestone. One of the more trying aspects of the situation was that Meg’s pride in her seemed lately to have grown. It might have been Bess’s love which had heightened her value or it might have been because the watch no longer offered superior attractions. But certainly she had been seen playing with her more than once in the sitting room and in the garden, as both Mother and Emmy were eager to report, and she had herself, according to Emmy, suggested taking her to the Mallender’s party last week. Perhaps she had taken her to Folkestone—or had Mrs. Laurelwood thought the journey too dirty for silk and lace?

If she had not taken her she was probably at that moment lying in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe in the front bedroom. The thought made Bess suck in her breath. It was a thought that had occurred many times already—the thought of Mathilda lying there with her closed eyes, asleep like a real baby, as she had lain in the grotto, on the moss. But now there was this difference, that she knew Mathilda was alone in the empty new part. Mother and Emmy had finished their cleaning and had gone their ways—Emmy

to Rushmonden, where she would do some shopping and look in on Ted, and Mother to lie down, as she had a headache. The conversation at dinner had carried this amount of information on its choked stream. If Bess went into the new part now she would have it to herself.

She decided to go at once. Now was her chance to have a look at Mathilda—to play with her if she chose. Anyway, she wanted to see if Meg had taken her to Folkestone. Nobody seemed to be about—Rosie Boorman, like everyone else, had taken advantage of the Laurelwood's absence and had gone to see her mother at Pond-tail. The men and boys she knew, were all busy. Piper and Barnes were washing out the cow lodge, Joe had gone down to the hop gardens to see about the pickers' huts, while Dad had driven over to Wagstaff about some roots, taking Clarence with him. As for Dick, he was no doubt asleep upstairs. She felt bold enough to walk straight in at the front door of the new part.

Feeling bolder still, she walked upstairs. The house was very quiet, and everything seemed to smell of furniture polish, soap and clean linen. Mother and Emmy had hung up fresh curtains and put clean counterpanes on all the beds. Looking in at the door of Mrs. Laurelwood's bedroom she saw on her pillow the most beautiful nightgown case of lace and embroidery with a big bow of yellow ribbon in the corner, and there was another one in Diana's room, of pink quilted stuff. The idea suddenly came to her that it would be a fitting revenge if she poured the contents of their water jugs over all their beds. But she decided to do nothing till she had had a look at Mathilda. After all, it might be best not to leave such an obvious token of her visit.

Mathilda's home was in the night nursery, and Bess found her courage failing her as she opened the wardrobe door. Did she or did she not want Mathilda to be there? Perhaps it would be better after all if Meg had taken her to Folkestone . . .

But Meg had not taken her. There she lay, clean and safe and warm among Meg's winter combinations and a lot of silver paper. Bess could feel her heart jump as she gazed down at her. If anyone comes, she thought, I'll say I'm dusting.

But no one came and Mathilda was in her arms again.

"Oh, my darling baby, I've found you at last and they shan't take you away from me." Her throat grew stiff with sobs as she realized that they certainly would. "Oh, Mathilda, what can we do? How can I make you really mine?"

She squeezed Mathilda hard and Mathilda said "Mamma."

For some reason this little sound turned Bess's misery to rage. They're beasts—beasts, bitches, cows, sows . . . all of 'em . . . beasts . . . why shouldn't I have Mathilda? Meg gave her to me—she's mine. They're thieves. And Meg broke my watch—she's got Mathilda and I've got nothing. I gave her my watch in exchange for Mathilda and now they've taken Mathilda and broken my watch. I've half a mind to break Mathilda too—then no one 'ull have her.

A broken Mathilda would mean the end of all her troubles, for there would be nothing any more to make her envy Meg, nothing any more to give her this pain of loss and longing; and into the bargain she would have a very handsome revenge. This would make them sorry they didn't take her with them to Folkestone. Of course there would be consequences, but, as before, Bess was inclined to sweep these aside from her purpose. She could deal with the consequences when they came and they might not come. She could always say that she had been cleaning out Mathilda's drawer and had dropped her. Not very convincing, perhaps, but enough for the urgency of the moment.

How shall I break her? With a hammer? Or shall I smash her against the wall? She will have to be smashed to bits or they will mend her; and her clothes should be torn up too—nothing must be left.

She did not like the idea of any of this—hitting Mathilda's smiling, sleeping face, tearing up—or cutting up, for she did not think she could manage really to tear them to pieces—her beautiful clothes of lace and silk and flannel and fine linen. She hated Meg and Mrs. Laurelwood and Nanny Wheeler and Emmy and Mother and even Granny, but she did not hate Mathilda. Still, it must be done—she must punish everyone for not taking her to Folkestone, for making all that fuss over what was after all nothing but a fair exchange. And she must get rid of Mathilda—put her right out of the world—or she would never be happy again and enjoy playing about the place or doing her brushwork at school or buying toys at Mrs. Austin's. She would never be able to enjoy any of these things while Mathilda was in the house; so Mathilda must go—she must be destroyed. "Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children and throweth them against the stones."

That was in the Bible—it was sung in church—but she did not feel at all blessed as she picked up Mathilda by the feet to dash

her against the wall. Perhaps she had better go down and get a hammer—it would be easier and quicker that way. Or better still, suppose she drowned her in the horsepond—then she would not have to do anything herself except throw her in, and she could do that without looking.

She was already on her way downstairs. Yes, she would drown Mathilda, but perhaps it would be better not to drown her in the horsepond as Mother might be looking out of her bedroom window. There was the old well at the bottom of the orchard—she could drop her in there and no one would see her do it; nor would the well dry up and give away her secret as the horsepond might do if there was a drought in September. Yes, she would drown Mathilda in the orchard well; that was better than the horsepond or than any hitting or smashing, Bible or no Bible . . .

She was out of the house and had whisked round the corner of it into the orchard. The well was at the far end, by the field gate. It had been used to feed a trough for watering cattle, but a year or two ago Dad had laid on a new pipe from the stream and the well had been boarded over. The boards were not fixed, so she did not expect to find much difficulty in lifting them. In the little tangled corner she laid Matilda down in the grass.

She lifted the first board quite easily, but the second gave her some trouble. She lurched, and for a moment thought she was going to fall into the well. She was too angry to be frightened, or rather the fright seemed in some queer way to become part of her anger. She hated everyone—all her family and all the Laurelwoods. Because it was their fault she was having to do this—having to drown Mathilda. If only they hadn't been so unkind and so unfair . . . Her sobs broke out, then checked as the field gate opened.

Who was this? And what should she say she was doing? Before she could think of an answer to the second question the first had answered itself in the appearance of Dick. She had forgotten all about him, or if she had thought of him at all she had taken for granted that he was still upstairs. But here he was, looking very unhappy, with his head hanging. No doubt he still felt sick. Perhaps he would not see her—he had turned the other way as he came through the gate and there was the trunk of a damson tree between them.

She watched him as he rambled along the hedge. Then he stopped beside an old rosebush that grew there. Would he look round? No, he stooped and smelled a rose. The bush had not been pruned

for years and there were not many roses on it, but Dick smelled them all. That was one of the things about him that annoyed Dad—the way he was always smelling flowers. He had even been known to take a handful of growing hops and squeeze them to his face. He was soft, Dad said.

Now when he had smelled the roses he picked one and stuck it in his buttonhole. Then suddenly he hid his face in his hands. What was he doing? Was he being sick again—or was he crying? The second possibility startled her for a moment out of her own misery. Dick stood for some time motionless with his hands over his face. Then suddenly he took them away and saw her.

"Hullo! What are you doing here?"

"Nothing."

He came toward her, unwillingly, she thought. Then he caught sight of the two boards she had lifted off the well.

"What on earth . . . you mustn't do that." He stopped as he saw Mathilda. "Bess—"

"Go away," screamed Bess, and burst into tears.

She wanted to snatch up the doll and run away—away, away, away, right down to the marsh, right down to the sea. But instead she found herself sinking into the long grass, and rolling over and over with Mathilda in her arms.

"Take care—you'll break it."

She could hear Dick's feet among the chervil stalks at her head and she could smell him as he crouched down beside her.

"What is it, Bess—what are you doing? Were you meaning to hide that doll in the well?" The smell of him came closer and passed into the feel of him as surprisingly he took her in his arms. "Poor little girl, you mustn't cry like this."

"Go away," she sobbed, but only half meaning it now.

"You couldn't hide it in there—that well's very deep. It 'ud have fallen right to the bottom."

"I—I didn't want to hide her—I wanted to drown her. I'm going to drown her. Don't you try to stop me."

"But you mustn't drown her. How can you think of such a thing? It will be found out at once and Dad 'ull half kill you this time."

"I don't care if he does. I—I don't care what happens. I don't want Mathilda to be in the world any more—it hurts me too much."

"Oh," cried Dick.

His tone had changed so suddenly that she looked up and saw



that his fist was clenched under his chin. He certainly looked very ill, with red-rimmed eyes in a face the color of celery.

"Are you going to be sick?"

"No, of course not."

"But you were last night—I heard you. Were you drunk?"

"Hold your tongue," he said angrily, and she began to cry again.

"I wish you'd go away and let me drown her. The gentry 'ull be back soon and then it'll be too late."

"Yes, the gentry 'ull be back soon." He stood up and looked through the trees at the sun, which was beginning to dip toward the marsh. But he did not go, and soon he spoke again in the old, quiet voice.

"Stop crying, Bess, and pick up that doll and put it back where you found it. Where did you find it?"

"In the wardrobe drawer."

"Then take it at once and put it back before anyone sees you."

"B-but I don't want to. I can't bear her to be in the world any more."

"She's got to be in the world," he said in a low voice, "and the sooner you get used to that the better—having her near, but not for you. That's life. And at least they're going away in September."

"But they'll come back next year. Oh, do you think they'll bring her with them again?"

"I dunno—it won't hurt so much then, maybe. It's while they're here now that it's so bad."

Dick had always been her favorite brother, but she had never expected him to understand like this. She stretched out her arms.

"Dick, comfort me."

"My poor liddle Bess."

He was down again beside her in the grass, and she was clinging to him as she used to cling to Granny.

"Oh, Dick, I'm so unhappy. Everyone's been so unkind and so unfair—it was mean of them not to take me to Folkestone."

"Poor liddle creature, did you want to go to Folkestone so tur'ble bad?"

"I did—surely I did. And I never thought they wouldn't take me. I wasn't naughty. I only let Meg give me her doll in exchange for my watch. To hear 'em talk you'd think I'd stolen her."

"Well, you've stolen her now, I reckon."

"Meg stole my watch—she broke it instead of giving it back to me—so it serves her right if I steal her doll."

"I shouldn't wonder if Meg didn't bring you back another watch from Folkestone."

Bess's head shot up.

"Do you know that?"

"Not for certain, but—I mean I heard them say she would have to buy you one out of her own pocket money, having broken yours."

Bess felt a little comforted. Not that a watch could in any degree atone for the loss of Mathilda, but some of the black injustice seemed to go out of her life at the thought of Meg being made unwillingly to spend her money on one.

"I reckon it won't be as good as mine," was all she said.

"It may be better. There's all sorts of grand things to be bought in Folkestone—such as you'd never see in Copstreet or even in Rushmonden."

"I wonder . . . Oh, Dick, d'you think it might really go?"

He shook his head.

"That 'ud cost pounds. But I shouldn't be surprised she didn't get it at the sixpenny Bazaar."

"Maybe there'll be a chain with it."

It was doing her good to talk like this to Dick, even though he would not stop trying to make her put Mathilda back in the drawer.

"Come along, Bessie, be a good girl now and tomorrow I'll take you down to the Oldwatering and show you a kingfisher."

This would be a treat. Whenever Dick took her anywhere he always showed her lovely things that she would not have seen if she had been alone.

"Will you? And not take Martin?"

"No, just you and me. But you must put that doll back where it belongs."

"Why do you pester me about that doll?"

"Because I don't want you to get into any worse trouble. If anything happens to it, it's you who'll be hurt—I promise that."

"Not more than I should if I put her back, knowing she's there but don't belong to me."

He shivered, as if he felt ill.

"What's the matter?"

But he did not seem to hear her. He was staring through the damson boughs at the yellow raking sun. In its light she saw a shadow which at first she took for the shadow of leaves, but which on a second glance she saw to be his beard. She noticed it for the

first time—a rough, stubbly beard like Dad's and Joe's when they needed shaving.

"Oh, Dick," she cried, "you've got a beard. You're a man now. Aren't you pleased?"

He looked at her half angrily.

"Don't talk a lot of nonsense—and come on, take that doll back, right back to the place where you found it. Be quick, for Mother's got up—she's making tea."

"Oh." Suddenly Bess felt afraid.

He stood up, holding out his hand.

"Come on."

"But I durn't go into the new part, with Mother about. She'll hear me."

"Not from the kitchen. But you must be quick and go while she's still there."

He took her hand and pulled her out of the grass. When she stood up she could see his beard still more plainly. He looked quite old.

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## INTERLUDE

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DIANA'S PREPARATIONS FOR THE NIGHT TOOK LONGER THAN ANYONE else's, and before she had finished them she became aware of a sleeping household round her. That supreme and lovely quiet took her back into past days at Idolsfold, when she had purposely lingered to achieve it. Then she had been a romantic girl in her teens, a girl with her head full of Tennyson's poems and Watts's pictures and Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words. Those had been the merchandize of her schooldays, banked with her own secret treasure of the Baroness Orczy, Maurice Griffenhagen and Franz Lehar. Sir Galahad had ridden through the candlelight with the Scarlet Pimpernel, lovers had embraced in a poppy field on the top of the world, the Spring Song had chimed with the Merry Widow Waltz.

In those days she had opened her window and leaned out into the dark, drawing in the warm rich breath of the fields, making her dreams a halo for the moon. She had pictured the knight or the gallant who one day would ride up on his black horse and toss a rose into her leaning breast, or some other day would follow her in silent worship as she walked, stooping to kiss her footprints in the grass. Those had been the dreams of her schoolgirl summers at Idolsfold; but that last summer—the only grown-up summer she had spent there had been of another texture. As she sat at the looking glass, her image harshly bright under the electric lamp, she

had another picture of herself at a mirror by candlelight, brushing her hair and smiling at her own mysterious, shadowed face as she thought of the dream lovers come to life—in Bertie, in Humphrey, in Dick.

Yes, she thought, I've been a success with men. Three of them loved me that summer, though I was only just out, only just eighteen. If I had not married so young I should have had many more, but I never was the sort of woman to take up with anybody after I was married, and men soon realize that and behave accordingly. I'm sure that those women who say they are continually run after by men they don't want must give some encouragement. I was a widow for no more than a year, but at the end of it as soon as it was decent to propose, I had two men to choose from. And that first summer I had three.

She studied her face in the glass as she pinned up her curls. Really, for forty-two she looked remarkably young and attractive, and of course people had often taken her and Beryl for sisters. She was probably better looking now than she had been in that summer of 1912. Her face, she remembered, had been a little too full, and she had never had much color. She would have been all the better for a little rouge and lipstick, but of course in those days make-up was out of the question. But her hair had been lovely—memory was sure of that—thicker and longer than it was now and perhaps a prettier shade, though that last tinting had been a great success. . . . She blushed faintly, for memory, less tactful now, suddenly offered a picture of herself letting down her hair for Dick to stroke and kiss. She saw the empty cornfield with a great moon shining like a lamp, and she felt Dick's warm breath on her neck as he hid his face in her hair which was the color of the moon.

The thought suddenly jagged her mind—could that episode possibly have anything to do with her parents' decision not to come back to Idolsfold? Had they ever suspected? No, of course not. If they had suspected as much as a tithe of what had happened there would have been an almighty row. She needn't be alarmed. Nobody knew about her and Dick—except her and Dick. That was the trouble now, of course—she would have to meet him some time this week end. It could not be avoided. Her heart sank as she wondered how much he remembered. The whole thing had been silly and rather disgraceful. Even after so many years she shrank from that inevitable meeting. She must have been mad—a lunatic with moonlight in her head . . . but of course she had been so

miserably disappointed and upset at not hearing from Bertie—so much in need of comfort. And there had been something in those kisses which no other man's since. . . . Silly fool! The house's silence was broken by the crack of her hairbrush against the dressing table. If only she could avoid that meeting. But of course it would be impossible to avoid it over a whole week end. And if he really drank, as Meg suspected, that would make matters still worse—make her still more ashamed of having loved him—been loved by him, rather. For she was quite sure that she had never really loved him herself.

Nor Humphrey either. But he was different . . . she would like to meet Humphrey again. She was not ashamed of her affair with Humphrey. Bess Hovenden had said that he was still living at Morghew, though no longer in the Hall itself. She would persuade Martin to walk with her to Morghew tomorrow. It would be fun to see the place and talk over old times with that delightful consciousness of there having once been "something" between them. Bess said he had married Maudie Colenutt, which was strange, for Maudie had always been a dull, unattractive little creature, and she could remember him impressing her, rather to her resentment, with the fact that he was not a marrying man.

But that sort of thing often happens, she told herself wisely. It may all have been much later, when his father died and laid on him the necessity of carrying on the place and the family. Or he may have been caught on the rebound. . . .

At breakfast the next morning the family met warily. It was many years since they had all three been together like this, and they had never had that unity which might have held together another family of the same size but more of the same age. It is true that gaps of four years or more did not at forty-two, thirty-eight and thirty-three make the difference they had made at eighteen, fourteen and nine. But they were responsible for many early divisions and dominations which still bore fruit. Diana had been alone in the nursery for four years, which in the opinion of the others had made her self-centered and self-asserting, while Martin was not only separated by several years from both his sisters, but for several more had been the only boy. Meg had similarly for a long time been the baby of the family, suddenly to find her privileged position usurped by Boy, who had remained almost indefinitely the spoiled child of his parents' middle age.

As a result they were more suspicious and unsure of one another than is usual in an otherwise happy family. Also their two rather dim centers of unity had been still further reduced in power. Boy, who had united them in a certain resentment of his favored position, was now a mining prospector in Iran, no longer to be envied or circumvented. And their mother, in whose presence they had always been a whole rather than different parts, lay in the remoteness of her sickroom but no longer in the danger which yesterday had brought them close to each other as it brought them close to her.

Instead of her at the table sat the nurse, bright, starched, clean, eating hungrily the breakfast which was to be her supper before she went to bed.

"Your mother had a splendid night, and I'm sure you won't have any trouble with her all day. She shouldn't be left alone for any long period, but I expect she'll spend most of the day asleep."

"Oh, we can manage perfectly," said Diana. "Nanny's an excellent nurse, and there'll always be one or another of us there too."

"The doctor said he would call in the afternoon."

"In that case . . ." said Diana looking at Martin.

"What do you want?"

"I was wondering if you would care to walk with me over to Morphew Hall and look up the Mallenders. I had an idea of going in the afternoon, but I really think the morning would be better, more informal."

"I don't see why you want to look up the Mallenders, informally or otherwise."

"Oh, yes, Martin. They'd think it very odd if they heard I—we'd come down here and had never been to see them. We used to be very close friends, you know—Humphrey and I particularly."

"I don't remember much about it, or them either. Can't you go with Meg?"

"Oh please," said Meg, "leave me out of it. I was only a kid, and I don't think Humphrey ever deigned to speak to me. I always looked upon him as a grown-up man. Bridget and Raby were my contemporaries and I gather that they're not there now."

"Well, I don't think I can manage it if Nanny is to be busy with Mother. I shall have to look after the children."

"Don't you worry about the children," said Meg, "they're just like you and me at their age, thick as thieves with the young Lardners."

"I can't remember ever being particularly thick, as you call it, with any Lardners. And I certainly don't want Tim and Angela to be so."

"Oh, come off it, Martin," said Meg. "They won't take any harm from June and Arthur, any more than you did from Clarence and Dick. Father and Mother may not have liked that sort of thing, but our generation had better learn to be more liberal, in view of what's coming."

"What is coming?" asked Diana, looking alarmed.

"Utopia," sneered Martin, "in other words, the Communist revolution."

Meg said nothing, but cut herself another slice of bread. There was a moment's rather angry pause in which the nurse said brightly: "It looks as if the Italians would be in Addis Ababa quite soon."

"Oh, have the papers come?"

"No. But it was on the wireless. I heard it when I went down to get myself a cup of tea. It seems a pity, doesn't it?"

Martin said: "I don't suppose it will make much difference in the long run."

Meg asked: "To whom won't it make much difference? To the Italians or to the Abyssinians?"

"To us, of course. The occupation of Abyssinia by Italy can't materially affect our interests."

"I should have thought it might affect them considerably—if there's another war."

"Another war!" exclaimed Diana. "There can't be another war."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, if *you'd* lost anyone you loved in the last war you'd know."

If only, she thought, Father and Mother hadn't let Meg go to the London School of Economics.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow your argument," said her sister.

But Diana saw the conversation as one specially designed to expose her ignorance, and changed it abruptly.

"Well, Martin, are you coming with me?"

"Where? Oh, yes . . . I suppose I must. But may I ask if you mean to call on everyone we used to know in the old days?"

"Of course not. For one thing, I don't think anyone else is still here besides the Mallenders."

"There's Emmy Lardner that was," said Meg. "She's living at Shadoxhurst, and Clarence has a haulier's business at Maidstone."



"Well we haven't time to go to Shadoxhurst or to Maidstone, and I don't feel drawn—"

"You used to be great friends with Emmy. I remember one summer you were always together. And I'm sure Martin would like to see Clarence again."

"Nothing of the kind," said Martin irritably. "I can't think why you always talk as if we had been bosom friends with the Lardners. We had to mix with them to a certain extent, of course, but we can't have had anything really in common with those yokels."

"Yokels indeed! Dick and Clarence used to be your heroes, and Bess was mine, and Emmy was Diana's."

Diana flushed.

"You're talking nonsense."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll be going bye-bye," said the nurse, posting a large piece of bread and butter in her yawning mouth.

Bess tied the scarves round the children's necks and tucked the ends into their coat-fronts. It was a cold morning—clear, blue, sunny, with a sharp little wind rustling over the marsh from Postreeds.

"There," she said, "and don't you take those off if you get hot playing. And you'd better not play in the orchard; there was a frost last night and it's damp now for Tim and Angela."

"Where shall we play, then?"

"Can't you keep in the yard? There's the barn nice and dry for you, and the red lodge. You could play there with Mummy Puss."

"Mummy Puss is dull," said June, "unless she's got kittens."

"Angela doesn't think so."

"Angela's silly."

"And so is Tim," said Arthur.

"Now, you're not to talk like that. It's only because they're younger than you."

"And have been brought up soft," said June, while Arthur enlarged. "Soft, silly, and sissy."

"I've told you that's not the way to talk. But, while I remember, Nanny Wheeler doesn't like you playing at ghosts, so don't have any more of it."

"But Tim likes it, Mum—he always chooses to be the one the ghost strangles."

"I can't help that. His Nanny says it might give him bad dreams."

"I like bad dreams," said Arthur, "they make sleep interesting."  
"Now none of your sauce, Mister, and both of you clear out at once. The children will be waiting."

"I want to say good-bye to Uncle Dick first," said June.

She was going through a period of demonstrative affection for her uncle, and now she went up to him as he sat with a book by the fire and put her arm round his neck. He smiled at her.

"Good-bye, June. Have a good time playing."

"I don't suppose I shall have that. What are you doing this morning, Uncle?"

"Oh, I shall just sit here, I think, and read."

"Is your head bad?" laying a warm paw heavily on his forehead.

"No, that's better, thanks."

"I can feel it bumping—"

"June!" exclaimed Bess. "Stop bothering your uncle. I've told you not to hang about here. Be off at once."

The children went out, and as soon as they had shut the door, Bess turned to her brother.

"Dick, you really ought to go out on a day like this. It's lovely. You'll only get cold sitting here."

"I'd get colder out of doors."

"Not if you did something to keep up your circulation, and there's plenty for you to do. George and Chaffield are carting stuff at Boldshaves. They'd be only glad enough of a hand from you, and it 'ud make you warm as toast."

He shook his head, then bent it over his book.

"Maybe I'll go later—not now."

Bess looked to see what he was reading. It was an old school prize of Mother's: *Songs of the Woodland*—poetry—and he must have read it a hundred times. He was always reading poetry—that and *The Kentish Lyre* and *The Reciter's Companion* and the little bits he cut out of the newspaper—anything that rhymed. He would read the same things over and over again, because they had very little poetry in the house, and though he was so fond of books, he seldom bought any, preferring to spend his money on something else.

Bess stifled a small feeling of impatience which immediately avenged itself by turning into compassion.

"Look here," she said, "I'll make you a cup of cocoa. That'll warm you up."

"Oh thank you, Bessie; I shall enjoy that."

She began to make the cocoa, then suddenly remembered something.

"Have you been in to see the Laurelwoods?"

Again he shook his head.

"Why not? You ought to have."

"I don't see why. I'm sure to run into them sooner or later."

"But I don't think you ought to wait for that. You used to be such friends with Martin—he'll be surprised if you never go near him."

"I'm sure to run into him somewhere on the place. It would be easier to meet like that after so long."

"Oh, Dick, do go—it would only be polite. If you want to make it seem accidental, now's the time, because he's just starting out with Diana to walk over to Morgheew. You could meet them as they leave the house."

His eyes became shadowed and uneasy.

"No, I don't want to, Bess—not now. I don't feel up to it. I think I'll take your advice and go and help George and Chaffield—it may make me feel better."

"I'm sure it will. Here, drink your cocoa first."

He took the cup, and his smile—swift, sweet and innocent—offered the usual propitiation for his unsteady hand.

Martin and Diana set out together more amicably than might have been expected. Martin still did not want to call upon the Mallenders, but it was a fine, brisk morning and he could not deny that a walk would be more enjoyable than supervising the notably esoteric play of his children. This was the first time he had ever seen the country round Idolsfold in its early clearness. His memory held a picture of it hot and smudged with summer—brown and golden fields, orchards spotted with colored fruit, lanes white with dust and sickly with the smell of meadowsweet, trees dripping with heavy leaves on which the showers rustled noisily. He had never even imagined it as it was now with its colors pale, its light austere, the lines of its trees and hedges pure and dark.

"It's remarkable how little this country has changed," said Diana.

"Funny—I was just thinking how different it looks from what I remember. We were never here, you know, except in summer."

"Of course I don't mean that. I mean that it hasn't been spoiled or built over like so many places."

Martin glanced at the Tarmac under their feet.

"I doubt if we ever walked on a surface like this in the old days, and I think I see—yes, that's a bungalow at the corner—quite a horrid little place."

"Well, it's nothing like the country outside Leicester. We're all

right at Compton still, but the city's creeping toward us, Jim says. And when you think this place is under sixty miles from London I really don't think you can say it's spoiled."

"I never said it was spoiled—far from it—but the distance from London wouldn't make any difference if it was."

Diana said nothing and for some time they walked on in mutual displeasure.

At the end of a quarter of a mile Martin said: "I can't think what made Mother come here so early in the year."

"You know why it was. She thought it would do the children good after all their colds this winter."

"I should have thought it would give them many more."

"It hasn't. They're ever so much better. You can see that."

"But she isn't. I shouldn't wonder if this visit wasn't the cause of her illness. Cold affects the heart."

"It hasn't been as cold as all that, and they've made her very comfortable at Idolsfold. You mustn't judge by the makeshift accommodation we've had to put up with."

"Still, it isn't really a proper place for an elderly and delicate lady. She ought to be staying at some nice seaside hotel."

"Well, it's she who chose to come to Idolsfold. It was her own idea entirely; and I can't say I'm surprised. She used to enjoy coming here with us all when we were children, and now she's reviving the past with Tim and Angela. It often happens like that with old people—they want to relive the days that are gone."

"Which is what you're doing," said Martin spitefully, for the pleasure of his walk was declining under the advancing threat of its destination. "In fact you're worse than Mother. I don't think she's ever been to see the Mallenders."

"That's different. She was friends with the old people, and they're dead. Our generation is still there and I naturally want to link up with them again."

"I can't remember that we were so very friendly in the past."

"You weren't perhaps—you were too old for the younger ones and too young for the others. But I was great friends with Humphrey."

"Humphrey? But wasn't he the eldest—much older than any of us? I thought your friends were Kitty and Dolly."

"Not that last summer. It was Humphrey then."

Something conscious in her look made Martin ask: "Was he in love with you?"

"Yes. It was only a slight affair of course—I was just on the edge

of getting engaged to Bertie. But he certainly was very much taken with me that summer."

"And *that's* why you're so anxious to meet him again."

Diana was silent and they walked on till the road became shadowed by the trees of Morghew Park. Here she stopped and to Martin's intense annoyance began to study her hair and make-up in a pocket mirror.

"I wish you wouldn't do that in the middle of the road."

"Why not? It might just as well be the middle of the Sahara for anyone there is about. And I don't want to arrive looking all blowzy."

She took out her lipstick and carefully improved her mouth. Martin had always disliked female make-up—Daphne had never used anything but a little powder—and he was especially outraged by Diana's choice of lipstick, rouge and nail varnish to tone with the crimson of her sweater and knitted gloves. Somehow an honest clash of colors would have seemed more decent at her age. Hang it all! She was forty-two, married to her second husband and the mother of two grown-up children. She had no business to be prinking herself like this to meet a man.

"Well, let's hope he admires you after all the trouble you've taken."

Diana, now feeling sure of her face, smiled sweetly.

They entered the park, which looked neglected, with rough grass and some fallen trees.

"I'm not quite sure after all these years, where the estate cottage is. I believe we take this side-turning. Heavens! What ruts."

"Well, don't let's go too far in the wrong direction."

"It isn't the wrong direction—I'm sure of that. Only I can't quite remember . . . Oh, look, there's someone. We can ask."

A man with a gun was approaching. He looked like a gamekeeper, but the next moment Diana exclaimed: "I believe that's Humphrey."

Martin's acquaintance with the Mallenders had been much slighter than hers. He could recall going to parties at their house, but she had been right as to the awkwardness of his age. Certainly the older Mallenders were little more than ghosts in his memory. He would never have recognized the distant, superior Humphrey in the shabby figure now before him. But Diana had already started a greeting when the stranger spoke.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you're trespassing. This is private property."

She was equal to this.

"Oh, Sir Humphrey, don't you know us?"

He looked startled and took off his hat. His florid, heavily veined face seemed to flush still darker.

"I beg your pardon."

"I'm Diana Laurelwood that was, and this is my brother Martin Laurelwood."

"Oh, yes—of course, of course."

They shook hands but Diana saw the necessity of explaining herself further.

"We used to stay every year at Idolsfold, don't you remember? Now we're back there visiting our mother, who's there for a few weeks."

"At Idolsfold."

"Yes. It was our great holiday place as children, and of course it was a treat to come over to Morghew and play with you all."

Would that place them? She was still doubtful, and a feeling of disappointment and annoyance possessed her.

"Of course you were much older than any of us. I don't think I ever properly knew you till the summer of 1912. I was grown up then and you took me out to tea in Folkestone."

"Oh, yes, yes—in Folkestone . . . 1912. Of course. I expect you knew my sister Kitty."

Diana bit her lip.

"Very well—we were great friends. Is she here now by any chance?"

"No, Kitty's in America—married a chap out there."

"We were coming to call on Lady Mallender. We used to know her as a child, when she was Maudie Colenutt."

"Did you, indeed? She'll be pleased to see you. Come up to the house and have a glass of sherry."

Diana was so angry with him that she wanted to decline, but Martin welcomed the sherry as the first sunshine of the day.

"Thanks very much, we should like to, if we're not taking you out of your way."

"Not at all. I was only strolling round."

They set out together on the muddied track.

"Shocking state everything's in," said Mallender. "But these are terrible times for landowners. I've let the house, you know, and Maud and I are in the estate cottage. There's a better way in from the Bibleham road—I had that part of it made up. She'll be glad to see you—always glad to meet old friends. You knew her father and mother, I suppose."

He was evidently doing his best to establish them, but Diana would not help him. It was Martin who said: "Yes, he was the parson when we used to be here."

"Removed to Suffolk now—an exchange. We go to them every Christmas. No one but ourselves at home, so it's best to get away. But they're getting old, of course."

"Are any of your brothers and sisters still in these parts?" asked Diana.

"Only Diamond."

"Who's Diamond?"

"Oh, didn't you know Diamond? My adopted sister Diamond? My father adopted her when she was a baby, but we've always thought of her as a sister. She married Dr. Freethorn, you know—the medico in Rushmonden—so we still see a lot of her. Perhaps she was after your time."

"She was," said Diana coldly, and wondered to herself: Will Maudie know who we are?

Maud Mallender certainly knew them. In fact her knowledge was so full and detailed as to constitute an aggravation of her husband's ignorance.

"Oh, yes, of course I remember. The dear old days! You used to come every summer with your father and mother and Nanny. And how the Lardners enjoyed having you! It used to be such an occasion for them every year. As it was for us, too, of course, at the vicarage. I had so few children to play with. But you used to come to tea. Meg was my great friend. Diana—you'll forgive me calling you that, won't you?—was too old and grand for me in those days. Ha! Ha! But Meg and I used to have great times together. Is she at Idolsfold too?"

"Yes, we're all there except the youngest—the baby of those days. He's a mining prospector in Iran."

"Oh, indeed. And your mother's been ill. I am so sorry."

Gazing at her high-colored face and flashing dentures Diana had some difficulty in reconstructing the pale stodgy child of her early memories. Husband and wife were remarkably alike—they might almost have been brother and sister. Diana found herself wondering uncharitably if a common taste for port and sherry had harmonized their complexions. Certainly they had no idea of not finishing the bottle now opened.

"Let me fill up your glass, Mr. Laurelwood. There's plenty more in the cellar."

"No thank you, Sir Humphrey. I've had enough, and we must soon be starting back to Idolsfold."

"Good of you to walk such a long way to see us," said Maud. "You must come again—tea or dinner—all of you."

"Thanks very much," said Diana coldly, "but my mother's so much better that we shall none of us be staying longer than the week end."

"Then I must call and see your mother. Very wrong of me not to have gone before, but I haven't been near Idolsfold for ages, I'm afraid. I used to make a point of calling on Bess Hovenden from time to time, but what with one thing and another I've got all behindhand with my visiting"—there seemed to Diana a strong echo of Rushmorden vicarage in all this. "I like Bess Hovenden—a brave little woman, coping with that very slow, inefficient husband of hers and that dipsomaniac brother. I like her the best of the family. Have you been to see Emmy—Emmy Arboys?"

She fired this at Diana, who said she had not.

"You must go and see her. She'd be so pleased. Poor woman, her husband's got a growth—inoperable, I'm told. Clarence Lardner's in Maidstone now and doing very well there. He married such a nice little woman. And Joe's widow still lives at Plurenden. Terrible tragedy, that was. He was killed in the war, just before the birth of their second child."

Diana had not come to talk about the Lardners.

"What's happened to all the rest of you?" she asked. "I hear that Kitty's married and I suppose Dolly is too."

"Oh yes, and Bridget and Raby—the whole lot, all married, including Diamond. Have you heard about Diamond?"

"Humphrey," Diana firmly called him by his Christian name, "told us she was Sir Charles's adopted daughter."

"Yes, she represents one of his more quixotic impulses. Of course everyone said she was his own child, and I can't blame them after all the talk there was about him and her mother."

"Her mother?"

"Yes, Daisy Brown. Don't you remember the Browns? He was my father's curate."

"Oh, of course." A picture had flashed into her memory of a woman in a red dress and a great hat trimmed with poppies. It had been shut away and forgotten for over twenty years, but now it



suddenly seemed one of the more important illustrations of her last summer at Idolsfold.

"Yes, I remember the Browns. And is Diamond her—their daughter?"

Maud laughed loudly.

"You may well hesitate. Everyone said it was hers and my father-in-law's. Jerry Brown just wouldn't have it with him. He married again, you know, six months after she died, and I don't know what would have happened to the poor child if my in-laws hadn't taken her. They weren't my in-laws then, of course. Humphrey and I married in 1925 and Diamond was one of our bridesmaids—such a pretty thing. She's lovely now—exactly like her mother."

"I can remember her mother," said Diana, "quite clearly."

"I expect you can. She was so—so—what's the word I want?—brilliant."

Other words had come to Diana: "flashy," "fast," but all she said was "I can remember her in a great cartwheel of a hat."

"So can I—and again with a sort of gypsy handkerchief round her head. She fascinated me as a child. I'd seen a number of curates' wives, but she wasn't a bit like any of them. She used to hug and kiss me, and once I remember I found her crying—I'd never seen a grown-up person cry. People said she painted, which in those days was an unpardonable sin; and of course her flirtations . . . Luckily Diamond doesn't take after her at all except in looks. That's right, Humphrey, open the other bottle."

"Not for us, please." Martin stood up. "We really must go now, or we'll be late for lunch."

"Stop and gnaw a bone with us here," said Maud unavailingly. Then "Can't you come to tea on Sunday? I'd get Diamond. She'd love to meet you."

"Thanks very much," said Diana, "but we're here for such a short time that we really mustn't leave Mother."

"On your next visit then. Now do promise me."

With vague promises they parted and went their way.

"Well," said Martin as they walked, "are you pleased with the results of your visit?"

Diana glared at him.

"I must say," after a pause, "that for an old county family . . ."

"Maudie's the biggest surprise to me," said her brother. "I can't remember the Mallenders at all well, but I remember her and she wasn't a bit like that."

"I can't understand Humphrey marrying her."

"There mayn't have been anyone else about who'd marry him. He can't have been much of a catch after he'd lost his money. By the way, he didn't seem to remember you at all."

"He wouldn't let on if he did, with his wife there."

"I can't see why not. Whatever it amounted to, it's very old history."

"Well, he didn't choose to revive it, anyhow."

She had now convinced herself that this was the explanation. Why should Humphrey have forgotten her if she had not forgotten him? He must remember her. He *must* remember her. The urgency was in a sudden fear—one of those fears which occasionally got past her armor, stabbing at her heart. If he does not remember, if nobody remembers but me, is it real, that thing which existed all those years ago? And even if it is, what happens when I die?—does it die with me? A faint shudder passed through her.

"Cold?" asked Martin.

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## DIANA LAURELWOOD

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THE WALTZ SWUNG IN HER HEAD. IT HAD BEEN IN HER DREAMS, A PART of sleep, and now it seemed a part of waking. Lying there with her eyes closed, she could feel the sunshine on her lids, with every now and then a flutter of shadow, as the wind blew the rose sprays across the light. One—two—three, one—two—three, went the waltz. *Songe d'Automne* . . . she could hear under the music the soft slide of feet on the polished floor and the murmur of voices like the murmur in a seashell. *Songe d'Automne*, by Felix Godin . . . one—two—three, one—two—three . . . Herr Moritz Wurm's White Viennese Band . . . they always play better after supper, everyone says—that's the difference between a foreign band and an English band . . . white and gold uniforms in a setting of palm sprays . . . great pots of roses, trailed with smilax . . . She could smell roses now, but they were not the roses of the ballroom . . . she opened her eyes and the whole thing vanished, leaving her in a white room, with a lace-curtained window looking out on a farmyard. The smell of roses mingled with the smell of home-washed sheets and of hot water smoky from the fire.

I must get up, thought Diana. In her basin stood the enameled jug steaming into a towel. Emmy had come in without her knowing, though doubtless her awakening was due to her movements about the room. She was generally awake when Emmy came and liked to talk to her as she rattled up the blind, emptied the basin used last

night, and after careful rinsing and drying, settled in it the hot-water can under its tent of turkish toweling. But she had slept more heavily than usual, for after all she had been up till after three o'clock the night before. The sky had been pearly with daylight as she stood on the doorstep, waiting for Bertie to fit the key in the lock, while Mrs. French and Pamela leaned out of the cab and cried amid much laughter, "Good morning, Di—good morning! We can't say *good night*."

He had held the door for her to go in, and as she passed him he had whispered: "I'll write to you." That was the last thing she remembered him saying before she ran upstairs, and she could not remember at all what she herself had said. She hoped it was nothing silly. And had she said good night or good morning to Mrs. French and Pamela in their cab? All those last few moments were lost in the beating of her heart. One—two—three, one—two—three . . . could one's heart possibly beat in waltz time? It had seemed to, ever since that night. Everything had sung *Songe d'Automne*, from her heart to the wheels of the cab that took them next day to the station, and then afterward the wheels of the train. The wistful music had sung all down the Rother Valley, and was with her still after her first night at Idolsfold.

The *Songe d'Automne* had not been the only dance they had danced together, but it was the only one to leave a ghost. Their first dance had been a one-step . . . Mississippi . . . She tried to recall the swing of it, but it had no power against the ghost. There had been the Merry Widow Waltz, of course, and the Waltz Dream, and the Dollar Princess and Luna and Gold and Silver. She had danced seven times with Bertie . . .

She slid out of bed. In the chest of drawers was her program. She had unpacked it last night, but had not been able to study it, as the markings of its little white pencil were mere smudges by candlelight. Now, if she took it to the window, she could see the H.C.F. . . . H.C.F. . . . seven times. Hubert Charles French. The name had a fine, distinguished sound. Mrs. Hubert French. Or even Mrs. Bertie French . . . rather smart and modern, after the style of the younger married set. She might be married before she was twenty . . .

Her mind broke off in mid-career, aware that it had galloped too far. Bertie had not proposed. He had not even kissed her. But he had said things . . . Leaning against the chest of drawers, holding the program before her rather as if it were a psalter from which she was singing praises, she set herself to remember all that he had said.

"I can see your ear and it's like a shell" . . . "You smell of roses"—roses, roses, was that why she had smelled roses ever since the dance? "You have such lovely hair" . . . "I wish this dance could go on forever" . . . ("Oh, so do I, so do I") "Must you really go away tomorrow?" . . . "You make me think of a lovely bird" . . . "I don't feel as if I'd ever known you until now" . . . "Di, Di, how wonderful you are," and then last of all: "I'll write to you."

The tears stood in her eyes and one of the smudges on the little program became a blot. She started as the door opened and her mother came in.

"Diana, why aren't you dressed?"

"I'm sorry, Mother, but I didn't wake when Emmy called me. I expect it was being so late at the Leadbitters' dance."

"Yes, of course. Good morning, dear."

"Good morning." They kissed.

"Diana, you're cold. How long have you been standing like that without your dressing gown?"

"Oh, not long. I feel quite warm."

"Nonsense, put on your dressing gown at once, and do get started. You're still rather slow over your hair, and it puts Mrs. Lardner out if we're late for breakfast."

"I shan't be late."

She spoke abruptly, for she felt cross with her mother for waking her out of her waltz dream. Also she was sensitive on the subject of her hair. Everyone said how wonderfully she arranged it and how nice it looked, but she knew that it still took an unconscionable time to do. She was not really used to having her hair up, and this style, with so many partings and swathes and separate curls, and the big frame that had to be fixed to the crown of her head, gave her a lot of trouble. It was worth it—she looked fashionable and about five years older than she had looked three months ago; somebody had even said that she looked like Gertie Millar.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to let it down again while you are on holiday? Lots of girls do, you know."

"Thanks, but I don't want to be like lots of girls."

It would be dreadful, dreadful, she told herself, to return to her flapper days, to lose this privilege of bound and elaborate hair. Mother didn't understand. As if it wasn't bad enough to be coming to a place like Idolsfold, only sixty miles from home, to spend a dull family holiday in dull English country, instead of going abroad, or to Scotland, like other people—like Bertie French. Her new grown-

up state was her only consolation for all she had missed by going away so soon and going to the wrong place.

"Very well, dear. But don't be too long."

Her mother's gentleness rebuked her—Mother knew that she was tired and would not be provoked. But she herself remained unappeased. Her mother had wakened her out of her dream and now the burden of Idolsfold was upon her. She had never been in love with the place like the others. All she had ever cared about was the people—tea parties at the vicarage, tennis parties at Morghew Hall, revelations from Emmy of a world unlike her own—but now the people themselves had withered and worn stale. They were not the people she wanted, they were dull, familiar, trite and flat. Why come down to it all again when she might have gone somewhere else? If only Father and Mother had not been such stick-in-the-muds, coming here every single year since their marriage, and indeed for many before it. She caught and stabbed with a tortoise-shell pin a gleaming fold of hair.

She was ready now. The swathes and switches were in place. *Papier poudré* had given a fragrant smoothness to her skin. Her high-collared blouse, tight, thigh-molding skirt and buckled shoes made her feel grown up again. And she was only ten minutes late.

The breakfast table seemed to fill the dining room. Sunshine poured over it, freaking the familiar blue and white china, melting the butter and the honeycomb into a richer gold. A huge cottage loaf towered crusty on the breadboard, and a posse of white eggs in blue egg cups flanked the huge brown teapot which held the room's reflection in its curves.

"A regular country breakfast," beamed Mrs. Laurelwood.

Diana sat down, squeezing into the only empty place, between her father and Nanny Wheeler.

"How crowded we are."

"The table's really too big for the room," said Mr. Laurelwood, "but I don't see how it could be smaller, with all there is on it."

"You'd never think this milk could be the same thing as what we have in London," said Nanny.

"It's yellow," said Martin, "and the London milk is blue. Mother, may I have another egg?"

"Yes, dear—I don't think it could hurt you. What will you have, Diana?"

"I'd better have an egg too. There doesn't seem to be any choice."

"Well, what could be nicer than a new-laid egg? These are straight out of the nest this morning, Mrs. Lardner told me."

"That's why they're so soft." Her eye traveled distastefully to Boy, being fed his by Nanny.

"They're more wholesome that way. What about you, Harry? Could you manage another?"

"I rather think I might. Mrs. Lardner says she's got a ham for us tomorrow. Nothing like home-cured ham."

Odd, thought Diana, that it should be considered the proper thing to talk about food at Idolsfold, while it would be greedy if we talked about it in London. She felt a little ashamed of herself for being so out of tune with them all, but the crowded table at which the younger ones were present instead of feeding apart in the nursery, the hunks of bread instead of toast, the thick black tea, the clumsy china and the home-washed tablecloth made her feel almost homesick for more elegant surroundings. Why do we never stay at a hotel?

Mrs. Lardner looked in at the door.

"Got everything you want?"

"Oh, yes—and more," Mrs. Laurelwood's laugh was like a child's. "What a lovely breakfast."

"Well, we like to have you back again."

"And we like to be here."

"Mrs. Lardner," cried Meg, "has Bess gone to school?"

"Yes, she's been gone a good hour now. But when she comes back I expect she'll be asking if she may have another look at your beautiful dolly."

"And I want to see her toys too. I wish it could be her holidays."

"They won't start yet awhile. But never mind, you'll find plenty to amuse you."

"I thought you might go and visit Maudie Colenutt today," said Mrs. Laurelwood when Mrs. Lardner had left the room. "I'm sure she would like to see your doll. Nanny will take you and Boy over. What about you, Martin?"

"Oh, I don't want to go there, Mother. Maudie's only a kid. I'd fixed to go with Dick and Clarence in the cart to Plurenden. They're fetching a pig."

"Martin," said his father with a twinkle in his eye, "I hope we shall see something of you these holidays—that you won't spend the whole of them with Dick and Clarence, as you did last year."

"There's nobody round here of my own age except Dick and Clarence. The others are all kids, or else grown up."

"What about your sister Diana?"

Neither Martin nor Diana looked pleased.

"Oh, well—but surely if Meg can play for hours and hours with Bess, I can amuse myself when I like with Dick and Clarence. Besides, I do so want to go over to Plurenden and it's our first morning."

Without deliberate intention he had spoken the charm.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Laurelwood. "As it's the first day, let's all do what we like—for a treat."

"I can't do what I really like," said Meg, "because Bess isn't here."

And I can't do what I like either, thought Diana, because I am.

"Never mind, Meg," and her mother leaned over to spread more honey on her child's slice of bread. "You shall do what you like next best. I'm sure you'll enjoy taking Veronique to call on Maudie—in fact I shouldn't be surprised if afterward you didn't find you liked it best of all."

"I shan't. It had better be Boy's treat—he'll like going, and Nanny too. I shall keep my treat till another day."

"What a funny little girl you are." Mother looked offended. "And what's Father going to do for his treat?"

"I shall go over to Pigeon Hoo for some painting. Whose treat will it be to come with me?"

"It had better be Diana's. I can't get out much this morning. My treat shall be talking to Mrs. Lardner and arranging things."

Oh heavens, thought Diana, how dreadful all this is. But something in her melted when her father turned to her and said: "Coming with me, Di?"

"Yes, Father, of course."

He looked pleased, and for the first time she began to foresee some enjoyment in the day.

The improvement lasted. After breakfast she changed into her bicycling skirt, with its slit sides and cunning gore. Her father was sorting his painting tackle, and she waited for him out of doors in the sunshine. It was a changeable day, with rushes of light and shade over the countryside. After a wet month the marsh held pools which changed their color as the sky flew over them. Emmy came out and they chatted pleasantly.

"How's Ted?"

"Working hard, as usual."



"Have you any idea when you're going to be married?"

Emmy shook her head, where the dark hair clung smoothly without curls or French combing.

"No—it's all very difficult, that part. You see, Mother and Dad don't hold with his being in the bicycling trade. If he'd been a farmer they'd say we had enough to marry on. But you never know with bicycles."

"Wasn't he thinking of starting a garage?"

"He hasn't got the money for that, and I don't see as he'll ever get it, things being what they are."

She sighed, and Diana thought she looked more thin and careworn than last year. There was a change, too, in their relation to each other. They were only a year apart, but up till now Emmy had always appeared and behaved as very much the eldest. Leaving school at twelve, putting up her hair at fourteen, working with her mother in the house and dairy, walking out with Ted Arboys and becoming engaged to him, all this had made her seem years older than the schoolgirl Diana. But now the schoolgirl had disappeared, and an elegant young lady stood in her place, superior in looks, style and dress to Emmy, who in comparison seemed awkward and countrified. Something in her look and voice showed Diana that she too was aware of the change, and she felt obliged to speak of it.

"I put my hair up at Easter."

"It suits you," the brown eyes surveyed her without envy, "but it's made you look quite different. Both Mother and I say we wouldn't have known you at first."

Diana laughed happily.

"I put it up to go to church on Easter Sunday, and lots of people thought we had a visitor in our pew."

"It must be difficult to arrange like that."

"Oh, I had lessons. I went to a shop in the Brompton Road and they showed me how to do it. And a man came and did it for me when I came out. Did you know that Mother and a friend of ours, Mrs. French, gave a dance for me and Pamela French to come out at? They hired a room in Kensington Town Hall, and asked over two hundred people."

"It must have been lovely," the brown eyes seemed to grow larger. "Ted doesn't care for dancing."

"I adore it. I've been to heaps of dances since then. Mrs. French chaperones me if Mother isn't there. I went to one the night before we came here—Mother didn't come to that one, as she was tired

after the packing. I shared a cab with the Frenches—Mrs. French and Pamela and Bertie.”

She had reached him at last. Her tangled thoughts and memories had brought her to his side, and she rested there a while in smiling content.

“I expect you have some beautiful dresses,” said Emmy.

“I came out in white, of course—cream, rather, as it’s more becoming. But I’ve got a pale blue with little dewdrops all over it and some pink rosebuds in front of the bodice, and an *eau-de-Nil* muslin with sprays of lily of the valley, and a pink taffeta covered with little ruches, and a plain white moiré with gold leaves.”

This was a great improvement on last year’s listening to the catalogue of Emmy’s bottom drawer. It seemed impossible now that she could ever have envied her, have felt so inferior to this poor girl just because she was engaged. Of course it would be nice to have that advantage added to the rest, but in the elation of the moment she felt it must come soon.

“Which did you wear at your last ball—the one before you came here?”

“Oh, my cream. That’s Mr. French’s favorite.”

She hoped Emmy would make her enlarge on this, but all she said was: “You must find it difficult to dance in those tight skirts.”

“They’re most of them slit for a few inches above the hem. Some girls are very daring and show a lot of leg, but I don’t care for that sort of thing, and I don’t think nice men do either.”

She became aware that someone had joined them and looked round. Dick Lardner had come out of the house and was standing close by. She had not seen him since her arrival, and the first thing she noticed about him was how he had grown—he looked a man now, whereas last year he had been a boy. The next thing she noticed was his expression. She had seen that look many times since Easter and knew what it meant. She smiled graciously.

“Hullo, Dick.”

“Good morning, Miss Diana.”

“It seems a long time since we met, and I expect you notice a difference in me.”

His eyes opened wider and his mouth opened too, but he seemed unable to say anything.

“I’ve been telling Emmy all about my balls. I’ve been to ten this season.”

Still he said nothing.

"Are you looking for Master Martin?" asked Emmy.

"That's right. I thought maybe he was waiting around here. We should ought to start."

But he did not take his eyes off Diana's face.

"Martin will be here in a moment," she said. "Mother made him change his clothes when she heard he was riding in the wagon. Tell me about yourself, Dick. There's a difference in you too. You look quite grown up."

He blushed and Emmy said: "Oh, Dick's a man now."

"Has he got a best girl?"

He shook his head and Emmy laughed. "That'll come."

By the look of him Diana guessed that it had come already. Never before had she seen a man fall so quickly or so flat. Of course he was only Dick Lardner, and her heart belonged to someone else. But she could not suppress the surge of gratification that suddenly made of Idolsfold a pleasant place.

A few minutes later she and her father were pedaling along the Rushmonden road, on their way to Pigeon Hoo. The clouds were piling up ahead of them into castles, the towers of which were white, rising out of dark keeps and dungeons cleft with murky fire.

"The fine weather ought to last the morning," said Mr. Laurelwood, "but I'm afraid we shall have rain later."

"I'm afraid so." Diana nodded her head wisely at the clouds.

"Still, I don't mean to do more than make a sketch. Later on, perhaps, I'll try for something more finished."

"You painted Pigeon Hoo last year, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it was a failure. Something went wrong—I don't know what. I hope to do better this time."

Glancing at him under the brim of her Panama hat, which she had pulled into a becoming dip over her right eye, Diana thought he looked rather pathetic, crouched over his handle bars, with his easel strapped to his back. He wore an old-fashioned Norfolk suit, which he kept for the holidays, and a sailor hat with a band of his old school colors. Under it in the sharp, stormy sunshine his hair looked decidedly gray. She had never noticed before that it was so gray. How old was he? His age, like her mother's, was kept a mystery, but she imagined him to be about forty-five. If so, then for forty-five years, no less, he had been coming to Idolsfold every summer. He had never missed. The thought made her catch her

breath. Here she was, at eighteen, already rebelling . . . had he ever rebelled?

"Father," she said, speaking quickly before she could think better of the impulse, "don't you ever want to go and paint somewhere else? I mean foreign places, Rome or Switzerland or Norway. Didn't you ever want to go abroad?"

He hesitated a moment before replying.

"Well, sometimes I have thought I'd like to go to Switzerland."

"Then why have you never been?"

"Well . . ." another pause, during which they went single file to allow a car to pass. "You see, we're both—your mother and I—very much attached to this place. And it's rather an undertaking to travel with a young family."

"Oh, I didn't mean take us with you—at least, not while we were small. But you and Mother could have gone. The children would have been quite safe with Nanny."

He shook his head.

"That would never have done. Your mother would never have agreed to that."

Diana felt suddenly angry with her mother. Her father had always been her favorite of the two, and now he appeared to her as a victim—her mother's victim.

"It seems a shame you shouldn't do what you like in your holidays—working so hard, as you do, all the rest of the year."

"But I am doing what I like. I like coming here. It's a second home to me."

"You might find it good for your painting if you went somewhere else."

"Oh, I don't take my painting as seriously as all that."

But she knew he did take his painting seriously. She realized, now that she knew more about it, that he was not so gifted as she had thought him when she was a child; but his industrious devotion remained as impressive as ever. Every holiday, for as long as she could remember, he had painted every conceivable object within reach of Idolsfold. He did not paint in London, though he visited picture galleries. His tastes were all for the rural and picturesque—old houses, cottages, farms, oasts, fields, trees, ponds and gardens, he painted everything, often over and over again. His more successful achievements adorned the house in Kensington; but he was critical of his own efforts and tore up more than he framed.

"Father," she said, "wouldn't it be nice if we could go to Scot-

land next summer? You could make some lovely sketches there, and it wouldn't be difficult even if we took the younger children. We could rent a house near Fort Augustus for a couple of months."

"Why Fort Augustus?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's just a name that came to me, and I believe it's very beautiful all round there. Do let's go."

"I'm sure your mother would never give up this place."

"I can't see why she should mind giving it up if you don't. After all, she hasn't been coming here all her life like you."

"But most of the important things of her life have happened here. Her engagement, her honeymoon . . . She's often told you. When you're older, my dear, you'll find yourself growing attached to places associated with the people you love. It's loving people that makes us love places and then the places make us love the people more."

Diana would not argue with him as she would have argued with her mother. Also she was impressed by being taken like this into his confidence.

"Never mind, Father dear. When you've retired you'll be able to go away whenever and where ever you like—to Switzerland and Italy and Scotland as well as here."

He laughed.

"Then I'll have to be a richer man than I expect to be. But we'll manage something, I've no doubt. You shall come with us, pet."

"It will be lovely," said Diana; but she thought, By then I shall have my own family and my own holiday places.

They had left the main road at Belgar Farm; and coasting down the steep lane saw in the valley below them Pigeon Hoo, a huddle of black and white and red beside the stream which was to become many waters in the spread of Shirley Moor.

Mr. Laurelwood wished to paint the house itself, which was rather like something on a calendar, with its high thatched roof and drip of roses. He had the farmer's permission from last year and at once set up his easel on a little green down above the stead-ing. Diana sat near him, her writing pad on her knee; but as she picked up her fountain pen she was not thinking of any letter she meant to write but of one she hoped would soon be written to her.

"I'll write to you." He had said no more than that. He had not said how soon. He might not write till he was in Scotland, and that would not be for over a week. His family had rented Arranmuir

from the sixth of August, and it was now only the twenty-fifth of July. Surely he would write before they left London. In her wilder moments she had half expected a letter that first morning at Idolsfold. Mercifully such moments had been too few and too unreal for her to have suffered any disappointment. Nothing usually came by that first post. Also he would have to write to her London address, for she had not given him any other. Pamela might know it, but on the other hand she might not. She settled with herself that he would write before he left London, but not at once. She would hear from him in a day or two.

For more than an hour her pen moved, with pauses longer than the pauses of her father's brush. She had one or two old school-friends to write to, a note to her dressmaker, a note declining an invitation to some unfashionably belated festivity. "But of course grouse shooting doesn't start till the twelfth . . . and unless people go to Cowes . . ." She did not know any people who went to Cowes. The Laurelwoods were prosperous middle-class South Kensington and no more . . . the Frenches reached a little higher . . . She could not imagine them at Idolsfold. Bertie had just been called to the bar . . . it might be ages before he could support a wife . . . But he knew some very good people . . . Father did not know anybody . . . poor Father . . . he only seemed to have Mother's friends . . . She watched him as he leaned over his easel, looking every now and then toward the farm, then back at his picture, splashing on color—color that she vaguely knew was not bold or bright enough, timid, dim shades of what his mind saw. She wondered why he had never made friends with anyone else who was interested in painting . . . they might have helped him. She herself knew very little about it and her mother even less. It was odd that he should be alone like this in the family on his little slippery island of talent. Suddenly she felt a desire to encourage and praise him. She went up and looked over his shoulder.

"It's coming, isn't it?"

"I hope so, dear."

She leaned her head for a moment against him before going back to her seat on the grass.

"Not tired of waiting, pet."

"Oh, dear no."

"I shall have finished in half an hour. This is only a sketch for a picture I mean to do later."

Footsteps sounded on the farm lane, light footsteps, a woman's,

approaching the house. A woman passed, carrying a basket and Diana's eyes followed her to the house door. She had not seen her face, but her back was remarkable enough in such surroundings. A huge cartwheel hat covered with poppies topped the pencil shape that fashion dictated. Why, though Diana, her hobble must be tighter than my new piqué.

She watched her stand at the door and receive in her basket butter and eggs from the farmer's wife. They talked for a while, then the stranger turned and came away. The smile with which she had said good-by was still on her face, showing very white teeth in a wide red mouth. Her cheeks were the color of the poppies in her hat—rouge undoubtedly. Diana stared. Who was she? She was pretty in her way, but terribly bad style.

She came toward them and her smile did not fade before Diana's rather disapproving stare.

"Please may I look?"

Mr. Laurelwood started. He had been so engrossed in his work that he had not even seen her arrive. There she stood before him in her sheathlike skirt, her peekaboo blouse and enormous hat, exuding a scent of frangipani which made Diana wrinkle her nose.

"I can't resist when I see an artist at work. Oh, please do let me look."

Rather to Diana's surprise her father seemed quite pleased to let the stranger see his picture.

"It's only a sketch."

"But it's lovely. You've somehow got the *feel* of the place—that sense of oldness."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Yes, indeed I do. There's a remoteness in time about it as well as in space—that faint blue mist seems to suggest both."

Mr. Laurelwood seemed really gratified.

"Perhaps you are yourself a painter."

She shook her head so that all the poppies danced.

"Alas, no. But I've known a good many, and I'm always interested in good work."

"I'm afraid this is very rough."

"Not a bit. There's all you want in a sketch. May I suggest one thing?"

"Oh, certainly. What?"

"It's just impertinence, and you may not agree. But personally I should like a touch of really brilliant red in this corner. The oast

has that effect on me when I look at it from here. But perhaps I'm wrong—I always have a tendency to see things more as color than as outline."

"I think you're perfectly right. Let's try it, anyhow."

He dipped his brush in Indian red and the picture suddenly came to life.

"There!"

They both looked at the picture, then at each other, and laughed.

"It's the very thing it needed," he said. "You must know a lot about painting."

"Oh, no, nothing. I'm only thankful I haven't spoiled it for you. Now I must be getting on. These things," lifting her basket, "are for our lunch."

She smiled her wide red and white smile, bowed rather stiffly to Diana, and walked away.

"I wonder who she is," said Mr. Laurelwood.

"Some visitor here I expect. She doesn't look local."

He seemed amused.

"How does one have to look to look local?"

"Well—er—either like a country person or like a lady. She looks neither."

"I thought she looked very much like a lady."

"Father! How can you? She was rouged and her clothes were obviously ready made, and she was wearing false lace and false jewelry."

"And do all those things make her not a lady?"

"Of course."

"You don't think that it's just because she may be poor and want to have pretty things like lace and jewelry but can't afford real ones."

"A lady would rather go without. Besides, there was the rouge. She's quite young and rather nice looking, so there's obviously no need for that."

Her father was putting his painting things together.

"Perhaps she thinks she looks nicer with it on."

"I daresay she does. But she's wrong, and a lady would know better. Besides, didn't you see how little notice she took of me? She never said a word—just spoke to you and ignored me. It's very ill-bred for a woman to single out a man like that."

He smiled ruefully.

"Evidently you don't like her, pet."



"I don't know her."

"Well, it doesn't really matter, as we're not likely to see her again. But she's saved my poor picture."

"She says she's known a lot of artists. Perhaps she's an artist's model."

He said no more till they were well on their way home, then in the midst of a silence he suddenly remarked: "I hope my daughter isn't going to grow into one of those women who disapprove of everyone who isn't like themselves."

"Oh, no, Father. But surely I may judge whether or not a person's bad style."

"Why should you judge at all? There are far too many judges. And style is a thing that's always changing. What's bad style one year may be good style another."

"I don't believe that rouge and false jewelry will ever be good style."

"If they were, would you wear them?"

"Yes, of course. Why not?"

He looked at her rather wistfully. It was not often that even indirectly he rebuked her and she found herself resenting it. There was a sharp ring in her voice as she added quickly, "But they never will be."

After a few moments' silence he spoke of the weather.

That evening, when Emmy was clearing away the supper things Diana lingered in the room and told her about the stranger at Pigeon Hoo. Emmy would be sure to know if anyone unusual was staying in the district. "A tall woman—at least she looked tall in that tight skirt—and very much painted, with a great big hat. Have you ever seen her?"

Emmy set down her tray, which meant she was ready to gossip.

"That would be Mrs. Brown, I reckon."

"Who's she? Is she a visitor?"

"No, she's the Reverend Brown's wife. He's the new curate." Diana was astonished.

"I never saw anyone look less like a curate's wife."

"Or act less like one, neither," said Emmy.

"How long have they been here?"

"He came last Michaelmas—soon after you left, and she joined him a month later. They've got Peartree Cottage in the Street, close by the church. He works at Copstreet mostly."

"And what does Mr. Colenutt think of her? I shouldn't think he'd approve of her appearance."

"I don't know as he does. But he's been uncommon hard pushed for curates ever since he came to Rushmonden. It isn't everyone who can work with Mr. Colenutt, and it's been nothing but chop and change for the last fifteen years. He isn't likely to turn a man away just because he doesn't hold with his wife."

"Is Mr. Brown a good curate?"

"Oh, he's all right. Leastways Mr. Colenutt thinks he is. Some would find him queer."

"And does Mrs. Brown do any parish work?"

"She helps in the Sunday school at Copstreet. But she doesn't always turn up, Bess says. She was married before, you know—to an artist."

"Oh, I'd wondered . . . she said she'd known a number of artists. Are there any children?"

"No—not by either marriage."

"I wonder what made her marry a parson."

She was interested. Mrs. Brown might be bad style, but she was not commonplace. Mystery and contrast combined to make her attractive. What had made that flaunting poppy into a curate's wife? Had her first marriage been unhappy, so that she turned to its opposite environment? How had she chanced to meet her present husband in Bohemian surroundings? There were a great many things one would like to know.

"They say," said Emmy, piling plates, "that she's an uncommon good friend of Sir Charles Mallender."

"Oh."

Emmy's head was bent—she was collecting eggcups from all round the table. The Laurelwoods always ate quantities of boiled eggs while they were at Idolsfold. They ate them for breakfast and supper; it was part of the tradition—emphasizing the contrast between town and country.

"They say they went to London together."

"Who says? I don't believe it."

"It's true enough. Bob Ades saw them get into the train."

"At Rushmonden? They may have been going in quite different directions."

"No—he saw how their bags was labeled. That was the week Lady Mallender went to Eastbourne."

"Does—does she know?"

"I reckon she doesn't know," said Emmy somberly, "but she guesses."

Diana felt thrilled and disquieted. Such things were quite outside her experience, even her imagination. This morning's stranger was looming larger than life.

"And he isn't the only man there's been talk about," continued Emmy. "That George Pepper, the carrier—they say she went with him for a bit. She isn't particular. But she likes them rich and grand when she can get 'em that way, and seemingly she can. There was a Lord something or other staying at Maidenbower, and he was quite mad about her till his wife hustled him off."

"But her husband—the curate—what does he think?"

"He can't do nothing to stop it."

"I wonder Mr. Colenutt doesn't ask him to go."

"Oh, I reckon they won't be here much longer. There'll be trouble of some kind—mark my words."

"But have you ever spoken to her? Is she nice?" Even as she uttered the word she blushed for its schoolgirl inadequacy.

"She's pleasant enough. Bess says they like her in Sunday school. I've never had much to do with her myself, and I don't want to. I don't care for that sort; and I'd be shocked to hear she'd ever been in the shop with Ted."

"Ted! Surely she'd never—I mean surely you can trust Ted."

"There's not a man in the world you can trust with a woman like that. They've got something about them that a man can't resist. Rich, poor, married or single, it's all the same—there's something about them that sends a man mad."

Diana's eyes opened wide. She was learning.

"Do the men ever recover—come to their senses?"

"Some do, some don't," said Emmy, making wide sweeps with the crumb-scoop.

After that, time seemed to jog. There were no more encounters with fascinating and mysterious strangers. Instead, all the old grooves were reopened. The Laurelwoods went to tea at the vicarage and to tennis at Morghew Hall. Both could have been interesting occasions, but were not, for want of the only possible source of excitement. At the Vicarage a lank curate with long hair—that much detail had been supplied by Emmy—would have made all the difference with his background of sinister surmises. At Morghew even Sir Charles Mallender would have been enough. But at the Colenutts there had

been only the Colenutts—pompous Mr., dull Mrs. and suety Maudie—and at the Mallenders only the younger children, ranging down from twelve-year-old Bridget to Raby, aged three. The elder ones were away. Sir Charles was at Folkestone Races, and Diana had to play singles with the governess.

It was all familiar and boring and a little outrageous. Father and Mother had no business now that she was grown up, to make her endure this sort of holiday. Next year she must contrive something better—if only by then she could be in a position to say: "Mrs. French has invited me to go North with them for the shooting" or "Bertie wants me to go to Arransmuir with them this year." Her thoughts clouded, for that prospect no longer looked bright. It was now the seventh of August and Bertie had not written. She had convinced herself that he would write before he went to Scotland, but now the event proved that he had felt no such urgency. She was deflated, and the strain of successive mornings on which the post had brought nothing that she wanted was beginning to show itself in the dreams of successive nights. She dreamed continually that her letter came, that she grasped it, kissed it, opened it, and then found nothing inside—or some meaningless scrawl that she could not read; or some changeling effusion from a girl friend. Once even it had been a page of rebuke from her mother: "My little girl is getting spoiled."

That had been after a scene she had had with her mother—one wet afternoon, when confinement indoors and lack of anything interesting to do, had combined with anxiety and disappointment to make her bad tempered.

"Really, Diana, you're not helping me this year. This is just the afternoon for you to play with Meg. She's brought her compendium."

Meg's compendium was a box of assorted games, including halma, ludo, tiddlywinks and others less traditional. Designed for a wet day it was about as attractive as a wet day to both the sisters.

"Meg's cutting out pictures."

"And making a dreadful mess. It would be much better if she played a proper game."

"She doesn't want to and nor do I."

Mrs. Laurelwood frowned.

"Don't speak like that, Diana. I don't know what's come over you lately. You're changed—spoiled, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry, Mother, but I really am bored to tears in this dreadful place."

"What do you mean? What dreadful place?"

"This place. Idolsfold. Oh, Mother, why must we come here every year?"

Her mother looked really shocked. She and Diana were alone in the sitting room, where, owing to the darkness made by a little fern-stuffed greenhouse outside one of the windows and the ceaseless plop and tinkle of rain from the roof, the day seemed even wetter than it seemed out of doors. Mrs. Laurelwood was writing letters—an activity which in her case offered no bar to conversation. Diana lounged on the sofa with an old magazine.

The silence, busy with raindrops, lasted several moments.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Diana. We've always come here every year, and you've enjoyed it as much as any of us."

"But I'm tired of it now," better go on, since she had begun. "I want a change. It seems such a waste of a holiday to go to the same place every year. Why can't we go to different places like other people? To Switzerland or—or-to Scotland?"

"Switzerland! Scotland! Do you think we're made of money? You're certainly getting spoiled if you've got ideas like that."

"The Frenches have gone to Scotland, and they're not so very rich."

"The Frenches are very much better off than we are. And, besides, they're a smaller family."

"Well, couldn't the younger ones come here and us—Father and you and I—go somewhere else?"

"Your father and I haven't the slightest wish to go anywhere else. This place is nearly as dear to us as our own home."

"Father told me he would like to go to Switzerland."

Mrs. Laurelwood looked startled. "When?"

"One day when we were out bicycling. He said he'd like to do some painting out there."

"Oh, well . . . So would we all like to go. But it's out of the question at present. When you children are fledged and your father's retired we might think of it."

Diana said nothing.

"Meanwhile we must all be content with coming here. And so everyone is, except you. Even you, Diana were perfectly happy last summer. But I'm afraid all these balls and parties have turned your head. You see your friends going to more expensive places, and you don't realize that expensive places are often not the nicest to stay at. Here we're surrounded by old friends. Has it never struck you what

a difference it would make to the Lardners if we stopped coming to Idolsfold?"

"I don't suppose they'd mind. We make a lot of work for them."

"Now don't say that, dear. It's most ungracious. They love working for us. Mrs. Lardner's often told me how much she looks forward to our coming and how sorry she is to see us go. And dear old Granny Lardner can talk of nothing but our family—of your father when he was a boy, and Miss Frances, as she still calls me, and old Dr. and Mrs. Laurelwood. It would break her heart if we went anywhere else. For two generations now the Laurelwoods have spent their summer holidays with the Lardners, and I'm sure both families hope that when the third generation comes along it'll be the same."

There was an eager, misty look in her eyes, as if she already saw her grandchildren at Idolsfold.

"Well, Meg and Martin and Boy may do what they like. But I'm not coming here till the end of my life just to please the Lardners. I shall consider my own husband and family."

"Your husband!" Mrs. Laurelwood laughed. "Are you thinking of husbands already?"

"Well, I'm old enough. Girls have been known to have husbands at eighteen."

"It isn't usual. Anyway, I don't like it—thinking of husbands at your age, I mean. A nice girl doesn't think of husbands till she's met the man she's going to marry."

And how do you know I haven't? thought Diana. She resented her mother's unfailing assumption that she had no love affairs. Yet not for worlds would she have told her about Bertie.

"What I'm trying to say," she persisted, "is that I'm not in the same position as you and Father. You met him here and it was natural for you both to go on coming here. But I'm quite different. Whoever I marry, it won't be anybody here."

"How do you know? You may meet someone here whom you like. But that isn't what I'm talking about. You aren't likely to be married for a long time yet, and till you are I want you to learn to be content with simple pleasures. I know things haven't been easy so far this year. The weather's been bad, and Kitty and Dolly Mallender are away. But it can't rain all the summer, and Lady Mallender told me on Friday that the girls are coming home on the fifteenth. You'll be able to have some delightful tennis parties then. Meanwhile, what about putting on your mackintosh and taking these letters to the post for me?"

One compensation, one relief to her heart in exile, one point on which Idolsfold had the advantage over more contented years was Dick Lardner's obvious admiration—infatuation she might have called it, if it had been more openly expressed. He blushed now when she spoke to him, and seemed overwhelmed with embarrassed delight when she asked him to clean her bicycle. "Dick, you might be an angel and clean my bike." She had made it a test of her power, and never had her bicycle looked so trim and shining as when some hours later he brought it round to the new part. It did not occur to her till afterward to wonder how he had managed to fit in this labor of love with his ordinary work. One night, after she had gone to bed, she looked out and saw him standing in the farmyard, gazing up at her window. But he would never talk, and a flirtation in her Kensington experience was mainly an affair of words—nimble, allusive, flattering, conscious words. Dumb and blushing gazes were not a currency her exchange could honor; and she grew a little impatient when he offered no more.

He was by far the best looking of the Lardners, who were not on the whole a handsome family, and he had about him an air of refinement which contrasted with the loutishness of his older and younger brothers. She had heard him derided in past years for being "girlish" and "namby-pamby." He brought into farm life a sensitiveness which outraged other workers. She remembered a very angry scene when as a boy of twelve he had cried at the marketing of some favorite ducks. He had anguished for calves separated from their mothers. He would pick wild flowers while supposed to be at work, he loved to read, and he used even to beg his little sister Bess for the flower pictures she painted at school. Mr. Laurelwood said that Dick himself would have liked to paint and he would have been glad to teach him, but his father had been shocked at the idea. He didn't want him "made any worse."

All this made Dick possible as an admirer in a way that with Joe or Clarence would have been quite impossible; and such a picture of him was further illuminated by what Emmy had told her about Mrs. Brown. The fascinating, sinister, irresistible Mrs. Brown. Her story had a little shifted the focus of Diana's ambitions. She had grown up with the idea of being one day attractive to men, but she had not till now envisaged being irresistible. The kind of woman no man—even honest, faithful Ted Arboys—was safe with. They all go mad about her . . . a farmer one day, a baronet the next. Of

course Diana meant to do all this in a perfectly nice way, but Mrs. Brown had set the pattern, had shown her what was possible.

The only trouble was that both her adventures were at the moment hanging fire. The days passed without a letter from Bertie, and Dick would only stare and blush. These two deadlocks bore no real comparison with each other. She would gladly have let Dick go forever if his departure could bring Bertie back to life. But since there was apparently nothing she could do about the more distant lover—except at long, desperate last to write a letter to his sister in which he was not even mentioned—it might be as well to concentrate her energies on the one close at hand. It would be a most refreshing tonic for her self-respect if she could break down his shyness and make him openly her slave.

The time was now approaching for the Laurelwood-Lardner harvest picnic, and she saw in this occasion a chance to achieve her end. She and Dick would be together for some hours—at least she could make it so—and if she turned on him all her armory of charm and beauty and persuasion, used all the arts she had learned in the drawing rooms and ballrooms of Kensington, he would not be able to resist her. After all, she was, she told herself, just as pretty as Mrs. Brown and several years younger. If the curate's wife could make herself irresistible, why shouldn't she?

With this object she decided to wash her hair the day before the picnic. Nanny Wheeler was critical.

"What on earth do you want to do that for, Diana? You'll be getting your hair full of dust and husks. Far better wash it afterward."

"No, I'd better do it today. It's in a shocking state for want of a good shampoo."

"It's not so bad that it'll do it any harm to wait a day. Why, I washed it for you only last Thursday week."

"That's much too long to leave it really. I must get it done at once."

"Well, I'm sorry I can't help you with it. I'm taking Boy over to Pondtail to see the Crouches. I promised Ellen Crouch I'd bring him along some day, and the Mistress wants him to go this afternoon."

"It's all right. I'll manage myself or get Emmy to help me."

By four o'clock she was drying her hair in front of the kitchen fire and Emmy was admiring it.

"What lovely hair, Miss Diana. I never saw anything like it. Mine



doesn't come no further than my shoulders. I didn't realize before you had so much. Those pigtailed didn't show it off the same way as hanging loose."

Diana was pleased. When her hair was dry she brushed it for an hour and then, instead of putting it up, wore it in plaits for supper. She hoped this would give it a wave; her hair was naturally wavy, and she never used curling tongs. That night a fairy princess was in her mirror—a pale, dusk-tinted face with golden eyes, and a cloud of hair burnished by candlelight. *Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.* It seemed a waste that no one should see her but herself. Her thoughts sped bashfully to a night when another should see her in this cloud, lingered, questioned . . . and then ran away ashamed. Hurriedly she opened her little New Testament and read her evening portion, refusing even to let herself wonder if she would read it then.

The next day came and her mirror was full of sunlight. She had to twitch the curtain half across the window before she could look into it with undazzled eyes. The washing seemed to have doubled the amount of her hair, and when she attempted to arrange it in her usual rolls and puffs she found to her consternation that it had become unmanageable. The weight of it dragged out the pins, the fluffiness would not be tamed into coils. The frame slid about grotesquely on the crown of her head—she could have wept. For half an hour she struggled; more than common issues were at stake; it was not even sufficient to look well. Oh why, Oh why, had she washed her hair yesterday? She might have known that she would have trouble.

The breakfast bell rang; a few minutes later her father called her from the bottom of the stairs, then after an interval her mother came up to her room.

"Diana dear, what's happened to you this morning?"

"It's my hair, Mother, it won't go up."

"That's because you washed it yesterday. Nanny says she warned you not to do it."

"She never said it wouldn't go up if I did—and it has other times."

"It's up now. Take my advice, dear, and let well alone. We're halfway through breakfast."

"I can't go about like this. There—you see, down it comes. I'll look a fool at the picnic if my hair is always tumbling down."

"Then why not keep it down for today? I suggested to you before, you know, that you shouldn't put it up during the holidays."

Diana was silent for a moment, her hairbrush in one hand, a tortoise-shell comb in the other. Then suddenly she began pulling out hairpins.

"That's it; I'll keep it down for today. I expect it'll go up quite easily tomorrow, but today I shall wear it loose."

*Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.*

She tied it back with a big blue ribbon. It would be inviting questions to go to the picnic with her hair loose. But if she wore it in a pigtail, as in other years, she would not dare to unplait it, whereas a ribbon might always slip off and release a cloud.

The zest of conquest was in her heart as the Laurelwoods set out for the field. But for it she would have found the occasion ridiculous and boring—this mock matiness, this comradeship disguising an ingrained feudalism. Even last year she had been old enough to realize how stiff and awkward the Lardners felt, how embarrassing they found the whole procedure, especially the men. There they sat, interrupted at the climax of the summer's work, unpractically neat after an afternoon during which it had been necessary to keep their hair smooth and at all costs to avoid too much sweating. None of the men spoke a word; only Mrs. Lardner and Granny Lardner made any response to her mother's lighthearted chatter.

Diana herself did not want to speak. She had sat down opposite Dick and was watching him—watching him watching her. His eyes were never off her face when she caught him unawares. He wore, like the other men, his working clothes, brushed and tidied for the occasion, with a blue shirt of almost dazzling cleanliness. He certainly was a handsome boy, of a different type from the other Lardners. Their skins were mostly red and their eyes blue, while their hair was a dark, curling brown. His skin was tanned over pallor, and his eyes were dark, with long, soft lashes. She could not tell whether his hair was naturally fair or had been bleached by the sun, but the effect, whatever the cause, was unusual and attractive. He must be a throwback to some earlier generation of Lardners. Most of these old country families had good blood in them. She wondered what he thought of her hair.

Tea was over. Mrs. Laurelwood was making jokes about the crumbs, and Mr. Laurelwood was taking off his coat in preparation for his share in the field work. Nanny produced Boy's retinue of woolly animals, so that he could play harmlessly under her eye while she sat and talked to Granny Lardner. Mrs. Lardner and

Emmy were edging away toward the house, free at last to dispose of the threat of three different suppers—for the gentry, for themselves and for the hired workers. Bess and Meg went off together whispering, while Martin joined the men, his shirt sleeves for once uncriticized.

Many years ago, before Diana could remember, the picnic had taken place on the last day of the reaping. But this had been changed owing to an increase of Laurelwood sensibility to the agonies of rabbits driven out of their refuge in the heart of the field to fall victims to the reapers' dogs and guns. Mrs. Laurelwood, though she had cheerfully eaten the rabbits, had been upset by the method of their slaughter—a method that had shocked neither the old doctor nor his wife; so the picnic had been moved to the day when the corn was carried, and a solemn ride on the farm cart substituted for more primitive enjoyments.

It was a day in which the families were supposed to meet on the same ground. There were to be no social barriers or class distinctions. If Martin could fork and sweat and look like a farmer's boy under his mother's beaming eye, so Dick could leave the horses' heads and pick wild flowers for Diana without risking his father's contempt. It was Diana who was surprised. She had seen him sit silent during the picnic, and instead of attributing his silence to interfamilial constraint had imagined that her charms still froze him. Strolling along the hedge, she had wondered how she could overcome his bashfulness. If it did not melt in this afternoon's warmth, then there could be no hope of any thaw. She would have to give him up . . . as Bertie had given her up . . . No, no, no, that could not be. There must be some explanation of his failure to write. She would not believe . . . no, no, never.

"Miss Diana."

She turned, and there stood Dick holding a bunch of vivid blue flowers with mossy stalks and leaves.

"Ain't they pretty?"

"What are they?"

"Some sort of borage, I reckon, but I don't know for sure." He turned scarlet, but instead of the silence she expected words rushed out. "I picked them because they were the color of your eyes."

It was now for her to be speechless. She was astounded. What had done this? Her changed appearance or the familiar occasion? But in a moment she had recovered herself and rallied to the game.

"But my eyes aren't blue—look."

With an effort he looked into her hazel eyes and laughed awkwardly.

"I always thought they were blue. Reckon I never properly looked before."

She found herself blushing in her turn and thrilling strangely. He had a most attractive and unusual face, seen like this only a foot or two from her own. The short, blunt nose, the wide sensitive mouth were not those of a yokel, and his dark gaze, under those long lashes, seemed to hold all the promises of poetry and romance. She picked a little flower out of the hedge.

"That's more the color of my eyes."

"Toadflax? I'll never believe it."

"Why not?"

"You'll never tell me a beautiful young lady has eyes the color of toadflax."

"Perhaps I'm not a beautiful young lady."

She was feeling more at home in the conversation, but her light touch evidently confused him. He stammered a little as he said: "I—I've never s-seen anyone as beautiful as you."

There was another silence. The depth of feeling, of longing with which he had spoken was something new. It had frightened her, made her feel that she stood on unfamiliar ground. The next moment he said: "Please forgive me. Please tell me you're not angry."

"Why should I be angry when you say such nice things?"

"I shouldn't ought to say them, but I just can't help it. Every moment now since you came back I've been thinking of you."

He looked nervously over his shoulder, as if he feared someone might overhear him, but the empty stubble spread silence round them. Diana said: "You were afraid of me at first—when you first saw me with my hair up."

"I was all took aback. I couldn't get used to you."

"And is it just because my hair's down now that you're not afraid any longer?"

He shook his head.

"I'm still afraid."

"Why?"

"Because you're so unlike . . . so different . . . because I've no right to be talking to you like this. My Dad and Mother would never forgive me if they knew."

She saw that she must be more encouraging than she would have thought it nice to be to a man of her own class.

"But you and I are old friends. I'm sorry if my being grown up

has made you feel I'm different, because I'm not. And today I'm not even grown up."

She shook her hair and the bow fell off. He stooped to pick it out of the grass and then straightened to see the golden cloud she had tossed over her shoulders. She seemed to see her own loveliness gazing back at her out of his eyes.

"Oh, Miss Diana, what wonderful, beautiful hair. It—it's like the corn."

"You like beautiful things, don't you, Dick?"

"Reckon I do—all I can find."

"You must find some more and show them to me—like those flowers."

They were moving along the hedge, both of them troubled and delighted. She saw that she must make her moves quickly. In an instant he might lose confidence and withdraw again. It was astonishing that he had maintained himself so long.

"Dick," she said, "we must be friends. You and I are the same age and we like the same things. You mustn't be afraid of me, even if I look grown up. You're grown up, too, remember. You're a man. I noticed the difference in you this summer, just the same as you noticed the difference in me."

He shook his head, and said: "It ain't the same difference." Then they both laughed.

"No," said Diana. "It's a different difference."

The silly little joke seemed to draw them closer together, but she noticed that they were moving toward the workers round the cart, and she could not tell which of them had chosen this direction. Soon they would be heard and they had always been seen. A desire came to her to talk to him where they could be neither heard nor seen.

"Dick," her voice sank almost to a murmur, "do you ever come out after supper?"

"Reckon I come out most nights when there's a moon."

"There'll be a glorious moon tonight, the harvest moon."

She wondered whether she was conducting the affair as Mrs. Brown would have conducted it. Was she being irresistible?

"Dick, if you're out tonight, you may see me at the bottom of the horse field, down by Clearhedge Wood."

"Oh, Diana . . ."

His broken voice communicated its passion to her. She trembled as she walked beside him.

"Dick, please . . . I want you to show me beautiful things."

Then suddenly, herself afraid, she turned from him and ran out over the stubble to the farm cart.

Deep down in her inmost heart, under all her dreams, Diana knew herself for no more than a postulant in love. She had left school at Easter and gone to her first ball in June; her experience of her own attractions was only three months old. Certainly she had done well during those months—received much attention, admiration, many compliments. But what did it all amount to? Had she any real knowledge of love and its ways? She had learned how to flirt, but had she learned how to love? Up till now Bertie French had been her guide and pattern in these things, but now she began to doubt him too. Perhaps he had only been flirting, in which case she had no real knowledge of love. Both love and flirtation were in her experience affairs of words and glances. "Admirer" was the common word in her set for a would-be lover. She had never been kissed. In her set "nice" girls were not kissed, only those who were "fast"—at least so she thought. It was therefore a great shock when, in the shadows above Clearhedge Wood, Dick wasted almost no time on words but at the first chance took her in his arms and kissed her.

They had sat down under the wall of the forsaken lodge which stood close to the wood's edge, and she had expected very much the same sort of conversation as in the afternoon.

"Mother thinks I've gone out with Emmy."

"She's with old Ted."

"I know, but I'll tell her tomorrow not to let on we weren't together."

"Emmy had better not know about us."

"No, of course not. I'll tell her I just came out to look at the moon."

She lifted her eyes to the huge yellow disk, now sailing over the trees, and as she did so suddenly felt his arms come round her, suddenly smelled the clean warm smell of his body, felt him and smelled him for the first time in a trembling shock as he pressed his mouth to her cheek under her hair.

"Dick . . ." He had not dared kiss her mouth, so she was free to protest, but she said no more. She was too deeply startled. She had not expected him to act so quickly, so differently from other men.

For several moments they stayed as they were in silence. He was

breathing deeply, drinking in the scent of her loose hair. Then his lips moved over her cheek, gently, diffidently, tenderly, till they found her mouth. A motion of terrible sweetness assailed her, but at once she resisted it. This was, in the language of her training, "going too far." Even engaged girls, she had been told, did not allow their fiancés to kiss them on the lips. She moved, struggled and was at once released.

"No, not that."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." Again that inability to continue. She had never expected to find him so adventurous. She had imagined him considerably less experienced than herself, but now she felt sure he had made love to other girls. He could not have started right away like this.

He no longer held her, and with the ending of physical contact she was able to recover some of her old assurance. She said lightly: "I'm not the first girl you've kissed."

"But you are."

"How can I be? You kiss me as if you'd practiced on a dozen girls."

"Well, I haven't. I've never even so much as held a girl's hand before. Joe he's often pestered me to go out with him in the evenings and meet his girl's sister, but I never would!"

A sudden pang of jealousy made her ask: "What is she like, his girl's sister? I expect she's prettier than me."

He answered almost savagely, "She's only common dirt."

"Oh."

"Joe's like that. He'll go with a fly-by-night, and he's uncommon taken up now with this Beaty at the Crown. But I'd never have nothing to do with that sort—never, never. Don't let's speak of it, you and me."

He put his arm back round her and she did not repulse him, but leaned her head on his shoulder, listening through flesh and muscle to the beating of his heart.

In a few moments he said, "I heard something. Maybe we shouldn't ought to stay here. Emmy and Ted are about somewhere."

"Where shall we go?"

"We might go into the field."

They crept along the dark rim of the wood, to where the moon's brightness suddenly broke golden over the stubble. The moonlight

was like daylight, colors were discernible in its wash over the field; yet it gave Diana a sensation of dream and secrecy which daylight would have dispelled. She walked hand in hand with Dick, and when they came to the far gate, where a clump of thorn trees made a few shadows for them, they sat down in a sort of enchantment.

She had almost forgotten how to talk, and he had always been shy and uncertain with words. They sat with their arms round each other, looking out at the golden mysterious field. Every now and then they turned their faces to each other and kissed. She no longer let him kiss her without return, but learned his young face with her lips, finding it still soft and boyish where the first stubble did not grow. He was a gentle wooer, there was no roughness about him, but she could feel a trembling fire in his embrace that communicated itself to her, till in the end it seemed as if they were both burning—yet set on fire by the moon rather than by the sun.

"Dickie, darling Dickie, we must go."

She was the first to wake out of the spell and realize ordinary difficulties and demands. At the moment she could hardly tell whether they had been there in the field ten minutes or all night. But something within her must have sat alert and kept a fairly accurate watch on the time, for when at last after many kisses and promises he let her go back to the house, she found the clock just striking ten, a blameless hour.

She was still further befriended by a family crisis which she found at its height. Bess Lardner had been caught in possession of Meg's expensive new doll, and insisted that it had been given her in exchange for a toy watch optimistically valued at twopence. As the other party to the alleged bargain was in bed and asleep nothing could be done till next morning, but Mrs. Lardner and Emmy were both in the sitting room, enlarging and lamenting, so that Diana's return and even the discrepancy of that return with Emmy's passed unnoticed in the turmoil of Lardner apologies and Laurelwood concern.

When a few moments later her mirror showed her to herself she realized that she had indeed been fortunate. On no ordinary occasion would her tumbled hair, full of chaff and corn dust, her flushed face and trembling mouth have escaped notice. Now she had time to compose herself, brush her hair, and cool her face before her mother came inevitably to say good night. Only her hands still shook and must be hidden as Mrs. Laurelwood stooped



to kiss her cheek—for she knew that it was folly to think those other kisses lingered there to be discovered.

“Good night, darling. I’m sorry I’m late, but it’s been such an upset, this about Meg and Bess. By the way, weren’t *you* out with Emmy tonight? She talked as if she had been with Ted Arboys.”

“Yes—he came, so I didn’t stay to spoil sport. I thought you wouldn’t mind my being by myself; it was all so lovely I didn’t want to come in.”

“I don’t mind as long as you keep near the house. After all, this affair of Meg’s has shown me it’s best not to go about *too* much with the Lardners. I didn’t think any harm could come of her playing with Bess, but of course with children it’s easy enough for things to go too far. We elder ones must remember that the two families belong to two quite different orders of society. On both sides we should learn to keep our places. But I know you’ll be more sensible, Diana. Meg is only a child and it’s difficult to make her understand these things.”

“It’s quite all right, Mother. I only said I’d go out with Emmy because I didn’t think you’d like me to be out by myself at night. But if you don’t mind—”

“As long as you stop close to the house, as I said. I liked looking at the moon too when I was your age. I daresay your father would go with you sometimes, but he does enjoy his patience and his pipe after supper.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t dream of bothering him.”

She turned her face to the pillow, happy in the thought that she had secured her next meeting with Dick.

When she woke in the morning she was happy no longer. Fear had suddenly invaded her sleep and now was throbbing at her heart. Something had changed completely. Last night’s adventure was before her in every detail, but looking quite different from the way it had looked last night. She was like a person waking out of an enchantment.

Dick’s behavior seemed to her now presumptuous. He should never have dared to kiss her, even to hold her hand. As for herself, she had been cheap—she had made herself cheap. The ecstasies of that hour were remembered only as sensualities and frightened her. Even the moonlight was no golden magic shower but a baleful drench from a dish pan. How could she have been so mad? But girls did go mad and their madness led to terrible things she was

afraid to think of. Was that how it all happened? Were similar hours of rapture behind all those mysteriously dismissed servant girls and those names which suddenly dropped out of the conversation?

Sitting up in bed, her arms round her hunched knees, she struggled to rationalize the situation. She did not believe that she had done anything really dangerous—yet; but she was troubled by the thought that she did not know exactly where the danger lay. How far did one have to go before one need dread the birth of a baby? Was it possible that one might do the terrible thing, whatever it was, without knowing it? What was it exactly that happened? Or did nothing definite happen? Were the babies the fruit of those pangs of joy that had taken possession of her in Dick's arms?

She did not really believe that, but neither did she know for certain. She thumped her pillow. Why didn't she know? Why had her mother never told her? Her mother should have warned her. But her mother thought she was still a child, many years short of such perils.

The thought of her mother brought another, more practical sense of alarm. If ever her parents should find out . . . She shuddered. All this fuss about Meg and Bess, this warning against poor Emmy. What would they say if they knew about her and Dick? She herself was shocked now—shocked and angry. He had no right. Her mother had spoken truly; he and she belonged to two different orders of society and he had behaved outrageously in treating her as if they did not. It was all very well for him to kiss girls of his own class, if that was the accepted method of courtship among the lower orders, but he should have known that she must be treated differently, even if she had encouraged him a bit. She had not meant to encourage him to do more than flirt with her. But this was not a flirtation, it was common love-making.

"I'll make my hair go up this morning," she said, "if I die for it."

The hair went up quite sedately after its holiday, and she had not been wrong about its effect on Dick. Her mistake lay in judging her own reactions to his withdrawal. She had meant to avoid him that morning, but her father and mother had arranged to interview the culprits Meg and Bess immediately after breakfast, and the sitting room was given over to the tears and recriminations of their trial. Diana strolled out into the garden, and there he was waiting for her.

He stood just outside the gate, watching the door, and when

she appeared he blushed and drew back, just as she had meant he should.

"Good morning," she said lightly.

"Good morning, Miss Diana."

"You see," she said, "I'm a grown-up lady again today."

He mumbled something and turned as if to go.

As he did so, showing his profile with its short, blunt nose and the sweep of his eyelashes, she suddenly felt her heart betray her. Some of the magic seemed to come back and lie in his hand on the gate. It was a well-shaped hand, a much better kept hand than the other Lardners', even Emmy's. She could not feel ashamed that it had touched her. He was certainly a good-looking boy. Dress him in Bertie French's clothes . . . the thought of Bertie French confirmed the list of her heart toward him.

"You mustn't be afraid of me, even if I am grown up."

He smiled, still away from her but not moving away.

"You see," she elaborated, "Father and Mother might wonder and ask questions if I suddenly stopped putting my hair up."

"Yes, of course I see."

"It would never do."

"No, it wouldn't."

"Were you waiting for me, Dick?"

His color deepened.

"Well, I wondered; you did say . . ."

"What did I say?"

"That you'd like me to show you things."

"Yes, I remember, beautiful things."

"Well, there's a marten's nest under the beams of the red lodge, and the young ones are all there now. I've got some flies for them, and they're pretty to watch."

This, she knew, was not the sort of beautiful thing she had meant; but it would do.

"Thank you. I'd love to see them."

"It'll mean climbing up on the straw."

"Oh, I can do that. This skirt unbuttons at the hem, you know."

There could be no danger in going with him into the red lodge. Even up on the straw they would be within sight of anyone in the yard. If she went with him there, she might be able to lift the affair back to the level she had meant it to be on, the level of a respectful flirtation.

And so it seemed while they crouched together under the roof

and the little heads in the nest made their yellow gape in response to Dick's whistling. It was only when accidentally she touched his shoulder or his arm that her own perch on those higher levels seemed rather precarious. He showed no sign whatever of wanting to make love to her, and after a time she grew hungry. He was too timid, too decorous. Her grown-up appearance should not have this effect on him, since love is an adult concern. She made one or two verbal sallies, but he was evidently still too shy to respond.

After a while he helped her down to the floor. His hand held hers as respectfully as his mother or hers could wish, merely helping her as she slid down the stack. When her feet were on the ground she felt his grip relax, and immediately, automatically, her own tightened.

"Dick," she said.

For a moment he looked at her without speaking, while his eyes lit slowly. Then, as if her voice had been a magic wand waved over him, she saw him change, become once more the Dick of the cornfield and the moonlight.

"Diana."

"Oh, darling Dick."

"You'll meet me again tonight?"

"Of course—I promised."

"Oh, you lovely thing."

She pulled away her hand. She had been seized by a sudden, overpowering desire to cry. Blind with her tears she ran away from him across the yard and round the angle of the house. The door of the new part stood open, and luckily no one was about to see her rush in and up the stairs to her bedroom, where she flung herself down across the bed in a storm of weeping.

After that came seesaw days, when she repented in the morning of what in the evening had seemed almost holy in its beauty and bliss. Sometimes she was at the point of deciding that the affair must end. Those were the mornings after a rainy night, when it had been impossible for her to be with Dick and she had had twenty-four hours to wonder where they were drifting.

She felt like an inexpert swimmer being carried out to sea. This was not love as she understood it, either as a flirtation with a new admirer or as a serious commitment with marriage in view. A flirtation did not involve this mental and physical obsession. Dick now blocked out far more of her life than Bertie French. She could

not be happy without his kisses, she lived by them more intently than she lived for his admiration, his faltering praises of her loveliness. This was not flirtation as she had ever known it on the ball-room stairs.

On the other hand she did not see how it could lead to marriage. She and Dick were behaving, she imagined, like an engaged couple, but they were not engaged nor likely ever to be engaged. He never spoke of marriage, except vaguely and generally. Like herself he was hiding in the beauty of the present hour—with the difference that he hid himself more completely. She did not believe that after the shyness of that first morning he had felt any hesitations or regrets.

Of course well-bred girls like herself did sometimes marry farmers, and in certain secret moments—generally just after a meeting, when she was dreaming in the candlelight—she pictured herself as a farmer's wife, adored by her strong, silent, prosperous husband, the treasure of a whole countryside. Then Idolsfold which a week ago had seemed a summer's prison became a lifetime's paradise. But generally some smoldering gleam of sense would flare up to show her the impossibility of it all. She could not help knowing that she did not and never could belong to that life. Besides, such a marriage would mean more than just taking a risk. It could not happen without an earthquake. The regard of Lardner for Laurelwood and Laurelwood for Lardner was based on the maintenance of two separate social strata, and their fusion might well swallow up her world.

But if they were not to marry, where were they drifting? There was always that haunting fear of the unknown. Dick was gentle and diffident in his love-making, but the thought of her own ignorance appalled her and there was no one from whom she dared ask for enlightenment. Where were they drifting in their inexperience? Even if no further than the summer's end, the prospect was frightening. To end in nothing, all these raptures to end in nothing . . . in just saying good-by and going home. That surely was worse than their ending in something, that terrible unknown something which would change her from a good girl into a bad one and bring her parents' gray hairs down in sorrow to the grave.

She wept when she thought of these things, sitting up in bed in her frilled nightgown, while the daylight broke through the blind. But by evening she would be scheming again to run out and

meet Dick in the stubble field, even if for no longer than a few kisses at moonrise.

And now at last the moon had failed her. Every night it had risen later over the darkness of Clearhedge Wood, and now the time had come when it rose too late to be her alibi. "Diana, I don't like you going out like this in the dark. It was all very well when the moon was shining so brightly; but now you might catch your foot in a rabbit hole and sprain your ankle. I've been quite worried about you tonight."

"Oh, Mother, it's all so beautiful" . . . "Nonsense, dear, there aren't even any stars and your shoes are quite damp."

It was Dick who suggested that she should slip out of the house after everyone had gone to bed.

"The doors are never locked. You could do it easy."

"But—"

Her fears leaped at her throat and silenced her. This, she felt, was where the unknown danger lay.

"It looks like being our only chance."

Still she hesitated.

"I don't like the idea of getting up and going out in the middle of the night."

"Are you frightened, sweetheart? I'll take care of you."

"No, it isn't that—at least that sort of fright. But if we were ever found out . . . Oh, Dick, I wish the moon didn't alter so."

"But this will be safer than going out after supper. There won't be anyone about to see us or to ask questions when we come in."

"Don't you sleep in the same room as Clarence?"

"He'll never hear me if I go after he's asleep, and if he did he'd never take notice. He'd think I was out with Joe."

"Will Joe be out, then? If he saw us—"

"Joe'll be up at the village. He goes there most nights, and as I've said he's always pestering me to go with him."

Again that pang of jealousy of an unknown female "as common as dirt." She was ashamed of herself for feeling it, and yet, of course, she realized, such jealousies must be a part of love for any woman who was irresistible to men at all levels of society. If she was in that category now she must accept its limitations.

"All right," she said. "I'll come tonight, just to see how it works."

They were in the yard, unprotected from the gaze of eleven windows. He could do no more than touch her hand.

"My own lovely thing."

"What time shall I come?"

"Wait till it's after twelve, so that everyone's asleep. I'll look out for you at the usual place."

"If it's fine," giving herself the possible protection of a shower.

It showed every promise of being fine.

"How fortunate," said Mrs. Laurelwood, "for the Mallenders' garden party."

"Heavens!" cried Diana. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"That's very unlike you, dear. I thought you were looking forward to it. Kitty and Dolly will be back."

"Yes, I know. But—" She dared not say how disinclined she felt for such an afternoon. To dress up, to smile, to be polite and well bred, with this torment of fear and longing in her heart. How was she to do it? It seemed beyond her power. Yet she would have somehow to perform her part. She dared not attract attention to herself by any peculiarities. In other years she had always enjoyed the Mallenders' garden party, which was an important event to a much wider circle than any the Laurelwoods moved in. All the big county families would be there, and a probably titled house party. She would see lovely clothes and eat lovely food, and apart from all this, had everything been normal she would have enjoyed meeting Dolly and Kitty Mallender and showing them how much she had improved in looks since becoming formally grown up.

The sisters were four and two years older than she was, and last year she had found them highly sophisticated, especially Dolly. They had shocked her by puffing cigarettes in an arbor in the grounds; this year she had hoped she would be given a chance, that is a cigarette, to show them she could puff too. As she dressed for the party she found herself experiencing a faint return of interest in this other world. Putting on her best dress of spotted muslin latticed over soft pink silk, settling her huge hat with the roses on her carefully swathed and padded hair, she began at last to feel a little remote from the world where she had lived since harvest—a world in which clothes did not matter, and hair was loose—a world which as it receded became a sort of lunar landscape, white with a magic radiance and black with unknown abysses.

"You look very nice, pet," said her father.

She felt encouraged and smiled at him as she climbed into the wagonette. The afternoon, with its safe pleasures and elegant society, suddenly began to look like a sort of shelter from the

threat of the dark hours. It would be nice to revisit Morghew Hall as a grown-up person, as an irresistible woman, in fact. When she thought of herself last year, no more than a lumpy schoolgirl, the realization of all the changes a year had brought gave her still more encouragement. Kitty and Dolly would be surprised; even Sir Charles Mallender would notice that she was no longer a child but had become a "demned pretty girl"—she chose the phrase for him from the *Scarlet Pimpernel*. There was Humphrey Mallender, too, hitherto an unapproachable god, but now to be met and conversed with on his own level. Yes, perhaps it was just as well that the garden party should be today.

The whole family had been invited, for there were Mallenders of all ages, and lawns where nurses and governesses could seclude their charges. Boy sat beside Nanny Wheeler in his silk blouse and velvet knickers, smelling of soap and looking very pleased with himself. He was the most cheerful of the Laurelwood children, for Meg had been compelled by her mother to bring her doll, and Martin was of an age when it was positive agony to be clean. He was cross, too, because he was not allowed to sit next to Joe Lardner on the box. Diana felt thankful that Joe was driving them and not Dick. It might so easily have been Dick, and if it had, this curious sensation of "an afternoon off" would have lost much of its vividness.

Morghew Hall was about three miles from Idolsfold. It stood in its park on the edge of Rushmonden, a spreading house, mainly Georgian but with Victorian enlargements. The Mallenders were unequivocally county, and Mrs. Laurelwood had always been firm about the acquaintance. Every summer it was renewed and every Christmas cards were sent. The garden party, though the biggest local event of the summer, was not however regarded by her as conferring the same distinction as slighter invitations to tennis and tea. The company was too obviously mixed. The county would be there and a fashionable house party, but everyone in the neighborhood who was socially possible could depend on being invited.

Already, as they drove up the avenue, they had passed Mr. Benson, the Rushmonden bank manager and his wife, Dr. and Mrs. Trumper and the Colenutt family, all on their way to the house.

"And who is that extraordinary looking couple?" asked Mrs. Laurelwood.

"Oh, those," said Diana, pleased to be able to give her mother the information, "are Mr. and Mrs. Brown."



"Indeed," said Mrs. Laurelwood and immediately spoke of something else. No doubt she had heard all about Mrs. Brown from Mrs. Lardner, but she certainly would not be pleased that Diana should know what she knew. Her daughter asserted her independence by looking back at the curate and his wife and noticed that her father's eye was fixed in the same direction.

Mrs. Brown's appearance was certainly remarkable. Once again she wore an enormous hat, trimmed with roses this time, and a red foulard dress with—to complete the challenge—a red feather boa. Really, thought Diana, she's a little too *outrée*. One doesn't have to dress like that to attract men; and she smoothed the demure folds of her muslin gown.

She had not seen Mrs. Brown since the visit to Pigeon Hoo, and her husband she had not seen at all. His offices were confined to Copstreet chapel of ease, where the Laurelwoods did not worship though it was nearer to them than the parish church. There was something inferior about the ministrations of a curate, and Mr. Colenutt's curates had always been deplorable. In this case there was also the smell of scandal to be avoided.

The Reverend Jeremy Brown was a tall, rangy young man, whose hair was certainly long enough to cover his clerical back stud. Diana observed him with interest as the husband of an adventuress, wondering how much he realized his position. Did he know about Sir Charles Mallender? If he did, it was surely strange that he should come to the garden party. In fact it was strange that she should come, if tales were true.

She would have been interested to watch the couple shake hands with their host and hostess. Would there be any guilty looks or signs of embarrassment? Unfortunately the wagonette party was many minutes ahead of the guests on foot, and she did not see any more of the Browns till at least an hour later.

By then she was really enjoying herself. The process had begun right away with Sir Charles Mallender's greeting.

"Hullo! Who's this? Why, this is never my little Diana."

"Oh, yes it is," looking coily from under the brim of her hat at his handsome, florid face, "it's little Diana grown up."

She did not remember ever having been his little Diana before, in her uncouth days, but the fiction was worthy of maintenance.

"Well, I never! What a surprise! What a delightful surprise, I hope I may say, Mrs. Laurelwood."

"Oh, certainly, Sir Charles. I'm sure Diana is too sensible to have

her head turned by a compliment. Come along, dear, other people are waiting to shake hands."

Diana moved on, but already the sunshine was looking brighter, and when Dolly and Kitty came up with their own appraisal she had almost forgotten the moon.

"Hullo, Di! Father says you've turned into a raving beauty. Let's look at you."

There was a lot of talk and laughter which did not hide a genuine admiration. "How did you learn to do your hair like that? A first put-up is usually so obvious" . . . "You *are* a deep one . . . I mean it's so clever of you to have gone in for contrast. A great many flappers behave as if they're already three parts out" . . . "There really ought to be some difference between the caterpillar and the butterfly."

Diana could not think that the suddenness of her metamorphosis was due to anything cleverer than circumstance, but here again was an illusion worthy of support.

"I had some lessons from a hairdresser. I didn't put up my hair till matins on Easter Sunday. It would have taken too long to do before the early service. And lots of people thought I hadn't come a second time; they thought we had a visitor in our pew."

She saw a twinkle in Kitty's eye as it met Dolly's and wondered if she had said anything that did not match her appearance. But the good will and good humor of the sisters continued the same.

"Well, you're in for a lovely time. You're just the sort of girl men are sure to admire. Have you had many affairs?"

Diana cast down her eyes modestly.

"A few."

"It's early days yet. I had nothing my first season, but then I was scarcely human. Mother was having an economical fit and insisted on all my frocks being made by Miss Kite in Rushmonden. As for my hair, it was mostly hairpins. Dolly did much better, as she came out the same year Father's colt ran away with everything at Westernhanger. Hullo, here's Humphrey."

Diana had seen him coming for some time. At first she had thought he was merely strolling in their direction, but soon she realized that he was making purposefully toward them.

"Good afternoon. My father tells me I am to meet but not to recognize an old friend."

The old friend was in the same category as the little Diana and the artful flapper. As far as she could remember Humphrey had

scarcely ever spoken to her before. He had ignored her first as a child, then as a schoolgirl. She had always watched him with a certain awe, for he was extremely handsome—his father without his father's floridity—and according to Emmy, had a great reputation as a breaker of hearts; but she had never expected him to notice her.

Today, in his gray top hat, white waistcoat and lavender kid gloves, he was the most impressive emissary of the grown-up world who had hitherto extended a welcome. She bowed gracefully and twirled her parasol upon her shoulder as she had seen fashionable ladies do.

It was then she saw Mrs. Brown.

If she had ever formed any picture of the enchantress at the garden party it had been as the center of an admiring circle of men or else as talking with superior intimacy to Sir Charles Mallender. But now, on the contrary, she stood quite alone, apparently ignored by the chattering social groups. She looked forlorn. Diana could imagine nothing less like an irresistible woman with whom even Ted Arboys was not safe to be left alone. She stood there in her crimson dress like a pillar of fire, and as Diana watched her the Mallengers caught sight of her too.

"Hullo," said Kitty, "there's the burning bush."

"The bush that burns but is not consumed," interpreted Dolly. All that Diana could find to say was, "She looks very lonely."

"I hope she is," said Humphrey.

Diana realized with a thrill that she was on the edge of an interesting situation.

"Do you know her?" she asked.

"Everyone knows her and everyone avoids her—as you see now."

"But I thought—I mean, isn't she irresistible to men?"

To her discomfiture all three Mallenders burst out laughing.

"You pet!" said Kitty.

"She is," said Humphrey solemnly, "quite often irresistible to one man at a time. The only trouble is that the times change very rapidly and so do the men."

Diana did not dare ask if she was at that special time being irresistible to their father. Besides, they might not know; they might be unaware of Sir Charles' iniquity.

"What's her Christian name?" she asked. "It looks as if it ought to be Poppy."

"She certainly favors the color red," said Dolly, "but as a matter of dull fact her Christian name is Daisy."

"How very odd."

"Well, I don't suppose that when her godfathers and godmothers named her at the font they envisaged the sort of apparition we see before us now. If they had they would probably have drowned her in it."

Diana had an uneasy feeling that the young Mallenders were with difficulty suppressing more laughter.

"She's certainly very bad style," she said coldly and was about to change the conversation when Dolly exclaimed: "Look, someone is taking pity on her. Why, Diana, it's your father."

To her astonishment, not unmixed with horror, Diana saw that Mr. Laurelwood had detached himself from one of the groups and walked up to Daisy Brown. She looked anxiously round for her mother, but she was nowhere within view.

"He's met her before," she said as easily as she could, "when he was out sketching. She's interested in art. I believe her first husband was an artist."

"Her second husband is a curate, but I don't think she's particularly interested in religion."

"I wonder what made her marry him."

Kitty said drily, "Social rise."

"Look here," said Humphrey Mallender, "what about an ice?"

"Oh, that would be lovely."

She was glad to be rescued out of the Daisy Brown conversation into which she seemed to be sinking for the second time. She was still more glad when she found that her acceptance involved her strolling off alone with Humphrey (since neither of his sisters made any move to accompany them) to where strawberry and vanilla ices were being dispensed under a large red and white umbrella.

Close by a little stream ran through clumps of spirea under a miniature bridge. A weeping ash sheltered it from the sun and there was just room for Diana to sit on the parapet and enjoy her ice, while Humphrey stood beside her. A pleasant murmur of talk came from the group round the umbrella, who could see no more of them than patches of black or gray or pink or white when the dangling ash boughs swayed. As she took her first mouthful of ice cream Diana could not help thinking how much nicer this was than sitting alone with a man under a hedge in the moonlight.

"You've been away, haven't you," she said, opening the conversation. "You weren't here when I came before."

"No, I'm sorry to say I wasn't. I'd no idea what I was missing."

This was all true to form and Diana smiled sweetly.

"But I hope you were having an enjoyable visit somewhere."

"Not so enjoyable as I should have found it at home."

"With Kitty and Dolly away? They weren't here either."

"No, but you were."

This time Diana withheld her smile. She must not seem too easily impressed.

"I'm afraid my tennis is bad this summer. I've been too full up with engagements to get much practice."

"You came out this year, didn't you? Have a good time?"

"Splendid. I've been to nine dances since Easter, and to Henley."

"You dissipated child! What a pity there aren't any dances round here now for us to go to. I should love to dance with you."

Diana was not quite sure that she approved of the beginning of this sentence though it had ended on the right note. The next minute he improved it further.

"I must get my mother to ask you down this winter for the Hunt Ball."

"Oh, how glorious!"

Sheer rapture made her forget that she was an irresistible woman flirting with a rich and handsome man. She wanted to clap her hands, but dropped her spoon instead. As he stooped to pick it up for her he said close to her ear, "You darling."

Diana found herself blushing, tried not to, and blushed deeper.

"Meanwhile," continued Humphrey, once more towering over her "what about having tea with me some day in Folkestone?"

"Oh . . ." It was all exciting, delightful, but once more she was involved in the technicalities of a love affair. Meeting Humphrey would certainly not be so difficult and dangerous as meeting Dick, but he had made it as difficult and dangerous as he could.

"Oh . . . I don't know. I should love to, and we *are* going to Folkestone next week. But Mother doesn't allow me to go out to tea alone with men."

"She's quite right. Pretty little daughters need looking after. But in this case the invitation will come blamelessly from my sister Kitty."

"Oh, will she be gooseberry?"

"In theory, not in practice. You and she will sit down to tea together at the Grand and I shall join you, whereupon she will be called to the telephone and never come back."

"But won't she mind?"

"Not a bit, I'm sure. She'll probably go and have tea with some young man of her own. She and I often run our affairs together—it's highly convenient."

Diana did not like this implication of plurality, but remembered that a man of his age and attraction was bound to have had several love affairs, probably all disappointments. The next move was to indicate her own familiarity with the situation.

"Of course I'm unlucky, with Martin only fourteen. He can't help me at all. I have to rely on my friends' sisters." She thought of Pamela French and had a sudden queer feeling of guilt and distress. Bertie French was now buried two deep, but his grave was not so quiet as she had thought when only he lay in it. She could not be sure whether this was because Humphrey Mallender reminded her of him in some ways, while Dick provided nothing but contrast. But certainly for one moment it was Bertie and not poor Dick who rose up and reproached her.

"Well," said Humphrey with a smile, "I'm offering you my sister."

"Thanks very much. I shall love it. Thursday is the day we're going to Folkestone. Is that all right?"

"Perfectly. Remember, the Grand Hotel at four o'clock."

He took her ice-plate out of her hand, preparing to rejoin the other guests. She was disappointed, for she would have liked to sit with him there till it was time to go home. But evidently he was of a cautious disposition and did not want them to make themselves conspicuous. She rose with what she hoped was a good grace and they strolled back to the red and white umbrella.

After that it seemed an unkind stroke of fate that Dick Lardner should be the driver sent to bring them home. She had taken for granted that it would be Joe again. But no sooner was the wagonette in distant view than she noticed a much slighter figure on the box. There sat Dick, hatless, the wind lifting his sun-bleached hair off his forehead, while he looked away over the horse's head with those dark eyes which at all costs her eyes must never meet.

Of course, even if there had been no Humphrey, she would still have had to avoid meeting them. But the evasion would not have given her the uneasiness she felt now. She had not wanted to be reminded of Dick and her promises for tonight. To meet him tonight was unthinkable. Oh, if only she could forget that she had promised to do so.

She sat sideways in the wagonette, looking behind her and talking fast. Though she talked fast she talked carefully, for there were other things besides Dick's eyes to be avoided. She had better not talk much about Humphrey till the affair was better established, so she spoke chiefly of Kitty and Dolly and the invitation for next Thursday.

"I suppose it will be all right for me to go."

"Yes, dear, quite all right. I had hoped that this year you might come with your father and me to your aunt's—it's only children she objects to—but in her letter she says she's feeling very poorly and wouldn't be equal to it."

Thank heaven for that, thought Diana. She could not help wishing that men did not involve one in so many difficulties. Perhaps it was her own insecurity which made her avoid asking her father how he had got on with Mrs. Brown. She would have liked to hear, but she thought it possible that her mother had no knowledge of the encounter. She had not been there and something made Diana think she would not have been told. Her father had disliked her own criticisms of Mrs. Brown and certainly would not want her mother's too.

The wagonette stopped at the garden gate, and Diana was out before Dick could possibly climb down from the box to help her.

"Take care, dear. You'll tear your frock."

"Oh, it's quite all right," and tucking her parasol under her arm and picking up her skirts Diana ran into the house in a very juvenile and indecorous manner so much unlike her usual rate of progress that Boy and Meg and Martin all laughed.

As she ran upstairs into her bedroom she had a queer sensation of wishing she could run farther, not only right out of Idolsfold but out of the present day and night, indeed out of the present week. How lovely it would be suddenly to find herself sitting in the Grand Hotel at Folkestone, pouring out tea for Humphrey Mallender. She sighed. Bridgeless gulfs of insecurity and unpleasantness seemed to lie between her and that happy hour. Her mind tossed like a leaf, as pleasure, pity, pride and shame blew on it from different quarters. Sometimes nothing seemed real but her next meeting with Humphrey, but more often she could hardly see it across the chasm of the days between.

During those days she would have in some sort of way to clear up the situation with Dick. She would have to explain to him what at the moment was inexplicable even to herself. How did women

manage these things? How did Daisy Brown manage her rapid changes? Or in her case was it, as Humphrey had hinted, the men who changed, who fled from her hungry questing? If so, then in this respect at least Diana had the advantage of her. But she was too deeply disturbed for vanity. All she wanted to know was how to handle the situation. For her mind was quite made up. Humphrey Mallender had wiped out Dick Lardner as the sun wipes out the moon. Now once more she was at ease in daylight, safe back in the comforts and elegancies of her own world, and the terrors of the night seemed both monstrous and degrading in her memory. How could she have lent herself to such things? Have so cheapened herself? Have run such risks? She felt like a half-drowned swimmer who has just scrambled out of deep water, and was about as likely to throw herself back.

The hours till bedtime dragged slowly past her disheveled mind. She hoped that she was behaving normally, that her family would not notice anything unusual in her manner. But it was difficult to behave as usual when life was so much otherwise, and the safest thing seemed to say she had a headache and go to bed early. Even if she could not sleep at least she would not have to pretend.

Her failure to meet Dick would be a good way of preparing him for what was to come. The night was warm, clear and tranquil; neither cold nor rain would offer any excuse for her absence. He could not fail to understand. Yet though this part of the business was being made easy for her she could not help feeling a certain lowness, a certain pang at the thought of him waiting there, of his growing disappointment as the night waned. She would like to go to sleep before the moon rose and not wake up till daylight.

Greatly to her surprise, this is what happened. After one or two short, startled dozes, from which she woke once still to see daylight and another time darkness under the blind, she suddenly found herself dragged out of a black vacancy by Emmy's footsteps in the room.

"Hullo, morning already!" She sat up, fully awake and garrulous with relief.

"Yes, Miss Diana, and a lovely morning too."

Over the barn roofs the blue sky was damasked with a golden haze, and just outside the window, where a spider had spun his web between two rose sprays, hung a fillet of pearls. Diana had spent enough summers in the country to read this language. A glorious day was following on a glorious night. The weather would teach poor Dick the lesson her own lips were afraid of.



For a time she pondered the thought of leaving it to the weather entirely, or rather to these elements allied to the weather, to her absence, her silence, her avoidance of him. All that day she managed not to see him. In the morning she went out with her father, in the afternoon she rather unusually accompanied Nanny, Meg and Boy on a visit to the Colenutts, in the evening she sat at home and tried to make some *broderie anglaise* for her new petticoat.

When Sunday came the families divided on Rushmonden and Copstreet. Diana took Meg to the children's service and accompanied her parents to evensong. On the second occasion, just as they left the house, she had a distant sight of Dick looking more shambling and oafish in his Sunday blacks than he had ever seemed in his corduroys. But she did not think he had seen her too.

Of course this state of evasion could not last. She might prolong it, but not indefinitely—not even till after next Thursday, which for her was the end of time. She was therefore not unprepared nor even unresigned when, crossing the yard to join her father who was painting in the orchard, she suddenly ran into Dick at the corner by the oast barn.

"Diana!" he cried. "I've found you at last. What have you been doing? What's happened?"

He had been working on the cornstacks and he smelled of sweat. There were patches of sweat on his blue shirt and a smear of it on his forehead, matting the bleached forelock. His physical state helped her, and his manner, which was excited.

"I'm sorry, Dick, but I hoped you'd guess."

"Guess what?"

"That I can't come out with you any more."

She noticed how queerly his face turned pale under the sunburn.

"But—but why can't you? Have they found out?"

"No," she shuddered. "But, don't you see, Dick? I really couldn't come out in the middle of the night like that. It wouldn't have been proper," she added sedately.

"I don't see that what was right at nine turns wrong at twelve or any other time. Diana, you can't mean that you don't trust me."

She blushed, knowing what she had feared.

"Because," he continued, speaking desperately, "I'd rather die than hurt you, frighten you, displease you at all. Oh, how can you think such things after all these times we've been together?"

"It isn't that. Of course I trust you. But don't you see that we were getting ourselves into an impossible situation? Suppose I'd

gone on meeting you, nothing could ever come of it, not if we met every night till I go away. In the end we'd just have had to say good-by."

"But there's next year. Diana, we're young—we're only eighteen. There's plenty of time. As soon as Dad 'ull let me I'm going to New Zealand and I'm going to work there till I've made a place for you. It's a fine country and a fine climate and I'll give you a lovely home, just as good as anything you've ever had. I'm not asking you to be a poor man's wife—"

She scarcely heard the rest of the sentence. She was too surprised. She had imagined him to be drifting like herself, only more at ease than she was in their cockleshell. Now she saw that he had not been drifting at all, but steering, planning. His plan was impossible and repulsive, still it was a plan. Of two people making love in the moonlight only one had been a sensual dreamer, and that one had not been poor simple, rustic Dick Lardner, but elegant, well-bred Diana Laurelwood. She felt insulted and turned on him almost angrily.

"I'm not the sort of girl who marries a farmer either here or in the colonies. I'm surprised that you should think for a moment that I'd do anything like that. You must have misunderstood me pretty badly if you ever imagined—"

"But, Diana, don't you love me? Didn't you ever love me?"

Something in his eyes made her lose her nerve.

"Oh, I don't know . . . not now, anyway . . . no, no never."

He said nothing, and as she looked at him she could see the blow of her words strike his face, blotting out the Dick who had loved her and whose kisses she had loved. His queer dark eyes, blunt nose and wide sweet mouth all seemed changed, spoiled, broken with his spirit. In her fear she tried to salve what she had broken.

"I'm sorry, Dick. Don't take it so seriously. I mean, they were lovely, those meetings . . . and people can't help doing those things. But they can't go on forever . . . it's sweet of you to think they could. But it really wouldn't do. You'll soon see that for yourself."

She was like someone listening to her own high, rapid voice. As it fell silent she heard footsteps approaching the yard and the next minute Joe Lardner appeared. Dick did not move, but she swung round immediately, and forgetting that she had been going to the orchard ran back into the house.

After that the only thing to do was to push him out of her mind and slam the door. If she did that she would be able to make some-

thing of the idea that she had not quite broken his heart—that in time he would recover and see the folly of his hopes as well as the wisdom of her actions. It was queer that she should feel like this, want to rob herself of at least some of her triumph, but she had been shocked by that look on his face and did not want to think that it meant more than the anguish of a moment.

It was a help that he kept out of her way. He never attempted to speak to her again, and he seemed to be avoiding even the sight of her. From that day till Thursday, she saw nothing of him, even in the distance.

As a result, when Thursday dawned she felt positively happy. She had not expected to set out for Folkestone this year in more than a spirit of forebearance; but for Humphrey Mallender it would have been only another of those monotonous family pleasures she was growing too old for. Humphrey had made it glow again with the anticipations of her childhood, when all the delights of summer had reached their climax in that journey to the sea. Would it be fine? The eager question of Diana at eight was on the lips of Diana at eighteen as Emmy pulled up the blind.

It was a lovely day, clear and sparkling, just right for the new linen coat and skirt she had brought as a second choice for the Mallender's party should the weather forbid muslin.

"Diana, dear, isn't that a bit too smart for the occasion?"

"Oh, no, Mother. Do let me wear it now, as I didn't for the garden party. Besides, my green isn't really good enough for tea at the Grand."

"Yes, I'd forgotten you were going there. It's rather an unusual place for a girl to ask another girl to. I'm surprised she didn't choose the Creamery or the Mikado."

"Kitty can afford it. Her dress allowance is seventy pounds."

"Much too much, even though they are rich. It spoils girls to have too much money to spend on themselves—gives them grand ideas. But I'm glad that you should be friends with Kitty, as long as you don't imitate her too closely."

Diana wondered what her mother would think when the friendship was proclaimed to include Humphrey. Should she wait till they were actually engaged, as she had meant to do in the case of Bertie? This might be difficult in Humphrey's case, as her mother was not on the same terms with Lady Mallender as she was with Mrs. French. Perhaps in time she had better drop a discreet hint as to his intentions. "You know, Mother, that you said I *might*

marry somebody in these parts. Well, it's come earlier than you expected." Her parents could not fail to approve of the match. "My daughter, Lady Mallender . . ." Perhaps this evening she might reveal that he had been present as a third, of course. Her happiness began to take on an edge of tranquillity.

The Laurelwoods reached Folkestone shortly before midday. Idolsfold was only fifteen miles from the coast, but the journey took over two hours. First the wagonette brought them to Rushmonden where they crammed into what was always known in the family as the "darling little train." Then an obsolescent engine yoked to a third-class coach and two goods trucks bumped them on a single line through orchards, hop gardens and even farmyards, to the main-line station at Meadmerry. Here followed a long wait—for the London, Chatham and Dover Railway had a way of ignoring the darling little train—traditionally refreshed by chocolate out of the penny-in-the-slot machine. At last the London train picked them up rather condescendingly and deposited them at their journey's end with their baby carriage, picnic basket, sketchbooks and parasols.

In earlier times it had been the custom for Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood to have lunch with the aged Laurelwood aunt whose survival in Folkestone was the real reason for the visit. But the age and decrepitude not only of Miss Eleanor Laurelwood but of her servants had led to the substitution of tea, though Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood always called at the house in Cheriton Road before joining the rest of the family for a picnic on the beach.

Today they arrived a little flustered. Aunt Eleanor was ill and did not want to see them, still less to entertain them. Evidently the rejection had involved affront, and they were both rather heavily calming each other.

"Of course she's very old—just on eighty" . . . "Even if she had sent a wire it wouldn't have made any difference, and I'm glad to have been to the house and seen Smithers" . . . "Well, dear, we've done our best" . . . "I shan't be sorry to have some extra time for sketching. It's an ideal day" . . . "and I shall enjoy having tea with you all at the Creamery."

Diana felt rapturously independent of their schemes. Every now and then she turned over the face of the little watch pinned to her coat lapel by an enameled butterfly brooch and saw the hands creep nearer to the blessed hour. Her spirits made her agreeable and gay.

Her mother might smile at the return of the old unspoiled, easily pleased Diana, as she joined in all the family jokes over the ham sandwiches and the hard-boiled eggs. After lunch she herself offered to go with Meg to buy a toy watch for Bess Lardner. It was in the nature of a punitive expedition, for the watch was to be bought out of Meg's pocket money; but so gracious had events made Diana that she contributed more than half the sixpence that it cost. Meg had not wanted to spend more than twopence, but Diana, as the hands of her own watch moved past three was unwilling to search too many shops.

"You'll never get one for twopence in Folkestone. Only Copstreet has toys at that price."

"Well, if you're paying fourpence it won't cost me more than twopence. And I don't suppose Bess will like it any better because it cost sixpence. It isn't nearly so nice as the one I broke."

Cheered by this thought she was in as good spirits as her sister when they rejoined the party on the beach. Mr. Laurelwood had gone up on the Leas to sketch, while Mrs. Laurelwood was helping Nanny Wheeler pack the picnic basket, preparatory to a move into the town for tea and ices.

"Now remember, Diana, not to be at the station later than a quarter to six; but don't come earlier because I dislike the idea of your waiting there by yourself. Try and time yourself exactly."

"I will Mother dear."

"And give my love to Kitty, and don't forget to send your kind regards to Lady Mallender."

"I will—I promise."

"That's right, dear. Now go and enjoy yourself."

Diana set out with every intention of doing so.

She felt very much a grown-up lady as she walked along the promenade, holding up her skirt over a frilly peep of petticoat. On her way to tea with a handsome young man at a fashionable hotel, she relished a new savor in the town, which till then had been no more than a holiday town, a picnic town. The holiday ladies on the promenade, with their parasols and flowery hats, seemed her fellows and equals now, as they had never seemed in other years when she had been only a child or a girl. They shared the same tastes, the same ideas, the same hopes, even perhaps the same secrets. She noticed, too, some admiring looks from the men who walked beside them.

Then suddenly, without warning in the chances of the crowd, she saw Daisy Brown. She was alone and wore her inevitable red, but this time in fiery splashes on a black gown. Only a few yards divided them; Mrs. Brown was walking toward her and Diana hesitated as to whether or not she should bow. They had met, but they had never been introduced, and she did not think the curate's wife would remember her—certainly she had taken little notice of her that morning at Pigeon Hoo. The recollection was decisive, and she sailed past rather haughtily.

As she did so she could not help noticing that under all the paint Mrs. Brown's face looked drawn and miserable. What was she doing in Folkestone? And how had she come there? She had not been on the train. Diana felt that her curiosity was incompatible with her new estate, but she could not suppress it, try as she would. After all, was not Mrs. Brown of special interest to her as an irresistible woman? She sailed along, buoyant with the thought that in many ways she seemed to have beaten her at the game.

The hotel was there, the handsome young man was there, the obliging sister was there, and soon Diana was seated under a palm, pouring out tea from a small and surprisingly heavy metal teapot.

"Isn't this nice?" said Humphrey Mallender, with a smile that made her feel alone in the world with him under their palm.

"Yes, I am enjoying it. The only thing is I mustn't be late for the train."

"And what time's the train?"

"Five fifty-seven, but Mother wants me to be at the station ten minutes before that."

"I'll see that you are. The station's quite close to walk from the hotel."

A thought struck her.

"How did *you* come here?"

"By train from Ashford. Didn't you?"

"Oh, no. We came round by Rushmonden and Meadmerry."

He laughed.

"On that comic line! Why it must have taken you at least two hours."

"It did. But Ashford's too far from Idolsfold. I mean they can't send the wagonette all the way."

"Of course not. We're lucky at Morphew in not having to depend on a busy farmer for our drive to the station. My family is

always running in and out of Folkstone for one reason or another. My father, as you may know, is a very keen racing man."

"Yes, I had heard . . . is your father in Folkstone today?"

"No, only Kitty came with me."

"Oh. I saw Mrs. Brown on the promenade."

"And you thought that meant my father must be here too?"

Diana turned scarlet. It was exactly what she had thought, but she had not expected him to read her mind so easily.

"I—er—no . . . I mean . . . of course not."

"Well, it's quite a logical conclusion if you've been hearing much local gossip. My own opinion, however, is that my father and Mrs. Brown aren't on the very best of terms at the moment."

"Oh." What did one say? What was the proper rejoinder to a man who casually accepted the rumor that linked his father's name with a married woman? There were lots of things she wanted to say. She wanted to know if he and his sister were worried, if Lady Mallender knew, if Mr. Brown knew. She wanted to know all this and a lot more, but, frank as he seemed, dared she ask? She did not dare. She said nothing, but sat stirring her tea violently though she took no sugar in it.

"Mrs. Brown's charms," continued Humphrey, "are rather obvious and she is inclined to overdress her part. So it's natural that she should attract gossip in a small country place which expects the curate's wife to look—er—well like a curate's wife."

"I know she's very bad style, but don't you think she's pretty?"

"Pretty is scarcely the word I should use. She's not nearly so pretty as you, especially when you blush like that."

Diana blushed deeper than ever.

He leaned toward her. "I think you're sweet."

The happy time passed by. They sat under their palm, as on a desert island, washed by a murmuring sea of distant voices. From time to time an orchestra played a little tune, but Diana heard nothing except Humphrey's voice and her own answering him. Once their conversation had really started he said just the sort of things she liked and could answer. He was, she thought, cleverer than Bertie and made her feel cleverer too.

She enjoyed herself so much that she decided not to worry about the time. If she were late at the station her father and mother would think only that Kitty had kept her too long, and even if she missed the train altogether she could always go home with

Kitty and Humphrey by way of Ashford and enjoy his company for another hour.

But at half-past five he said, "It's very sad, but I'm afraid you ought to be thinking of catching that train."

"Yes, I suppose I ought."

She rose reluctantly.

"Wait a minute till I've paid the bill and I'll come along with you—here, Waiter!"

"Oh," began Diana, "I don't think that perhaps—"

"You'd rather I didn't come?"

"Oh, no it isn't that. But perhaps it would be better if Mother didn't see us together just yet."

"What do you mean by 'just yet'?" He looked at her penetratingly, then after a pause he continued. "I understand. You mean that if she saw us together she might make a very motherly mistake and take me for a marrying man. Later on she may be induced to accept me as nothing more important than your great friend's brother."

Diana, who had meant exactly the opposite, swallowed and said, "Yes."

"Don't worry. I shan't come with you farther than the end of the promenade. But naturally I don't want to say good-by before it's absolutely necessary."

He smiled, and some of her mortification vanished.

They strolled out together, and she wondered if Kitty would reappear. But she was not to be seen and her eyes roved more anxiously among the crowd in quest of her own family, now doubtless also on its way to the station. Her mother would not like to see her walking alone with Humphrey, and if he really was not a "marrying man," less honorably definite in his intentions than poor Dick Lardner, she would rather not have to explain the situation.

"Look here," said Humphrey, "how and when are we to meet again?"

"I—I don't know. We shan't be coming again into Folkestone."

"But you'll be coming again to Morghew. I'll get Kitty to write and ask you."

She wondered for a moment whether she should meet him with the coldness of doubt. Instead she heard herself saying, "That will be lovely."

"Good. I'll fix it with her—some day next week. Diana, have you ever been kissed?"



Once more he had made her turn scarlet. She forced herself to answer. "What do you think?" but her coyness was embarrassment in disguise. She would not have been embarrassed if she had never been kissed at all, or been like those few fast girls in Kensington who were always kissed at dances. But for her a kiss meant Dick Lardner's arms round her in the cornfield, and his lips searching for hers under her hair. A pang of shame pushed the whole afternoon out of focus.

"Well," he smiled down at her, "we shall see. I have an infallible way of knowing if a girl's been kissed before."

"Oh, I hope not."

He laughed. "Caught you, pretty bird!"

They were at the corner of Station Road, and as he stopped to take her hand the look in his eyes was like a kiss.

"It's very sweet of you to have come out with me today, Diana."

"I—I've enjoyed it so much."

"I hope you'll enjoy our next meeting even more. Good-by, you dear little thing."

"Good-by."

She hurried away with bent head and burning cheeks, as if he really had kissed her.

The journey home seemed to take longer than the journey out, though in reality—thanks to some small relenting of the main line—it took a quarter of an hour less. Everyone was tired and seven sagging figures seemed to crowd unpleasantly a carriage built, according to its own announcement, to seat ten.

There was nothing surprising in the children being tired; ices, overeating, paddling and excitement generally reduced Nanny Wheeler's department to apathy on the return journey, and Martin though not literally a child was at an age when overeating and overexercise are no less common than in childhood. But today Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood themselves seemed tired, though they should have had a less tiring time than when they had to go up all the way to Cheriton Road for tea. Instead of trying to rally the flagging spirits round them they sat almost in complete silence. Mr. Laurelwood had bought an evening paper, but it lay unread on his lap, and Mrs. Laurelwood leaned her head on her hand as if she had a headache.

Diana was tired too. Reaction had set in and was showing her how much, delightful as it had been, the afternoon had fallen short

of her expectations. She had fully expected to be able to disclose Humphrey's presence at the tea party, while also assuming his sister's, and to drop one or two hints that would make her parents encourage future meetings. She had hoped to be able to come out of the dim, awkward shadows of secrecy into a very flattering light. Instead of which, she found herself involved in an affair which promised to be very little different, as far as secrecy and contrivance were concerned, from her affair with Dick Lardner.

Humphrey Mallender was a flirt—that fact was proved—and a flirt of that sinister type which did not confine his advances to mere badinage. At their next meeting he would certainly want to kiss her, and she would certainly let him do so. In which case she would have joined that company of "fast" girls whose doings were darkly hinted at by Kensington mammas. Of course it was all quite respectable—daylight, not moonlight, and nothing to be afraid of in him or in herself. But she was disappointed that she could not for once play her part of irresistible woman in front of her family. There had been too many private performances.

Life was mysteriously thwarting. She had been obliged to renounce that charming picture of herself as Mrs. Bertie French, popular London hostess and leader of the younger married set, and now she must also forget that statelier picture of Mrs. Humphrey Mallender, well known in county society as a fearless rider to hounds and cynosure to every eye at race meetings and hunt balls. Indeed the only Mrs. she had ever had any chance of becoming—in the sense of being asked by the Mr. in question—was Mrs. Dick Lardner, the poor fool who had disgraced her family and spoiled her chances by running away with a farmer's son.

It was unfair and it was unkind, for how pleased her parents would be if she could offer them either of those two choices. They would be delighted for her to marry the son of a family they knew and liked so well as the Frenches; they would be proud for her to marry the son of a family they admired so much as the Mallenders.

She looked across the carriage at them, as they sat drearily opposite each other in the two corner seats, and suddenly a new fear assailed her. Perhaps they were "upset" because they had seen her alone with Humphrey. In spite of her careful examination of the crowd, they might have caught a glimpse of her on the promenade, and were only waiting to scold her till they reached home and privacy.

After all, she had arrived first at the station. They might have been following her. They might have seen Humphrey take and hold her hand, and she found it impossible to convince herself that they could not also have seen the look in his eyes. Though they would have approved of him as a suitor under their rules they would not approve of him as the unchaperoned escort of their daughter on the Folkestone Promenade. They would want to know his intentions and she was perfectly sure he had none. The situation was humiliating as well as distressing.

These reflections made the journey home almost unbearably tedious. The joggings, the shuntings, the waits seemed as if they would never end, and they had not been long on the darling little train before she was fidgeting and writhing in her seat as much as Meg or Martin. "Why on earth can't we go by Ashford?" she said crossly, when for the fifth time they had shunted back into Witsunden Station. "Surely it wouldn't kill the Lardners to drive us there once a year."

Nobody made any reply, and Diana felt more sure than ever that her mother knew all.

At last, however, they were at Rushmonden, and in the wagonette, driven this time by Mr. Lardner. Diana rather belatedly began to concern herself with what she should say when brought to task. Kitty, of course, had been present but had had to leave early. That was true as far as it went. As for a stroll along the promenade, even her parents could see no harm in it, unless they were aware of what had gone before. She must hope to be able to maintain the presence of Kitty without telling too many lies, and she had better let it appear that Humphrey had intentions—no need for anyone to know how much otherwise—specially if she was going to be invited to stay at Morghew for the Hunt Ball, as she still hoped she was. There was no good, evidently, in being oneself too particular as to people's intentions—no fun to be had that way. After all, Mrs. Brown's lovers could have no intentions in the accepted sense of the word.

She had reassured herself a little by the time she reached Idolsfold. Nonetheless her heart gave a thump when her mother, who had walked rather grimly into the sitting room, called: "Diana!"

"Yes, mother."

"Come here, dear."—Oh!—"Here's a letter for you."

They had started for Folkestone that morning before the post arrived, but Diana had long given up thinking about letters—about

any special letter. Therefore it was with no quickening pulse that she took the letter from her mother's hand.

"Why, it's registered."

Then the room swam as she saw the handwriting. It was the same as that on the little gilt-edged program hidden away in her chest of drawers.

She rushed upstairs. She must be alone. No one must see how her hands were trembling as she tore the envelope . . . registered . . . why had he registered it? Well, she would soon know. But she was so excited that she could hardly read the closely written page.

Oh, my Diana! What snags in the course of true love! I said I'd write to you, didn't I? And I expect you've been thinking a lot of hard things of me for not keeping my promise. Well, please unthink them all. Because I did write. I wrote the day before we left town, but like a silly ass I thought Idolsfold was a village, and addressed you care of Mrs. Lardner, Idolsfold, Kent. It was what I remembered you telling me, but evidently I remembered wrong, because it came back from the dead-letter office, "insufficiently addressed." I must say they took their time about it and of course it was delayed still longer by being sent to Cranley Gardens. I was going to write again, this time to your home, with "please forward" on the envelope, when your letter to Pam came along with your proper address. So I'm sending off this. Why registered? you ask. To make sure that you get it this time, and also, my sweet Diana, because it contains something that I hope you will think of some value. Not that I could exactly claim a refund from the G.P.O. if it was lost, but surely a proposal of marriage is important enough—at least to the sender—to be registered. Dearest, sweetest Diana, will you marry me? Don't worry—I didn't ask you this in the letter that came back from the dead-letter office, though I may have prepared the way a little. But all this time I've been waiting for an answer and not getting one and asking myself whether you didn't write because you didn't really like me and wanted to put me in my place. I've been realizing how much I want you and how I never could be happy without you. So when I saw everything had to be started all over again I thought it had better be finished, too. So please say yes, Diana. I love you and I know I can make you happy. We may not be able to marry for a year or two yet, but my prospects are

good, as parents say, and you can tell yours that, if they make any objections, which I hope they won't. Mine, I know, will be delighted and so will Pam—in fact she encouraged me to "go in and win." It is so long since we met that perhaps you will have forgotten all about me, but I do hope not. Oh, Diana, please write at once and make me happy.

Ever your devoted  
Bertie

P.S. I hope I am not being too precipitate.

Diana went mad with joy. No other term could adequately describe her transformation from the decorous lady mincing along the promenade into the dancing hoyden who went whirling, whooping and laughing round the room. She danced till her hat fell off and her hair fell down. She did not care how much noise she made, for she would be only too glad to reveal to any inquirers the springs of her delight.

Oh, she was happy—happy—her troubles were over, the desire of her heart was gratified. Nor had she, as she had had a week ago, to face the pain of making another person wretched. All she had to do was to refuse Kitty's invitation when it came. Humphrey would understand and he would not mind—at least not more than he deserved to mind.

Now she saw plainly she had never loved anyone but Bertie French; the other two were only her efforts to comfort herself for his supposed loss. Bertie was the man she loved, even more than Humphrey Mallender her own class and sort and at the same time gentle and sweet natured as Dick Lardner. He had not what she saw now as Humphrey's sinister sophistication, nor could his passion ever frighten her as Dick's had done. She would marry him and she would live happily ever after, as she could never have lived with Humphrey, always supposing he had wanted to marry her, or with poor Dick, supposing he had been able. What madness could have deluded her into thinking she was in love with either of them? She seemed to wake from every other dream as the dream of her heart came true.

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## INTERLUDE

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THE CHILDREN WERE PLAYING IN THE RED BARN. ARTHUR WAS THE ghost, emitting brown owl hoots from behind a heap of pressed and corded hay. The other three cowered in happy dread of his approaching sally. Dick watched them.

He leaned against the great oaken king post of the barn. Dinner was at one on Saturdays, and he still had some moments of pleasant languor left before the inevitable summons from the house. He felt the better for his work with George and Chaffield, as Bess had said he would, and the thought of dinner was not so repugnant to him as it had been yesterday. That was always the last thing to come back—his appetite.

Meanwhile there was more healing for his shaken mind in watching the children play. He felt safe with them. Their entire lack of criticism, their absorption in something remote from the common dealings of life, all helped to put him at his ease, to smooth away his shame, to make him forget both anger and pity. He smiled as the ghost rushed out, booing hideously, and the others flew squealing in three different directions. One of them, Tim, ran straight into a couple who had just come into the yard.

"Look out," cried Martin. "What *are* you doing?"

"We're playing," said Tim, and Angela ran up forcibly to embrace her father. The other two stood suddenly motionless, like parts of a machine when the electric current is cut off.

"Well, I hope you're not playing ghosts. You know Nanny said—why, hullo, Dick."

Dick came out of the shadows of the barn. He would not have come if he had known whom he was going to meet. He saw a short, middle-aged man, with spectacles and a small mustache, and a tall, elegant woman, very much made-up. No one could have been more unlike what he remembered of either of them, but he recognized them at once.

"Good morning." His smile flashed nervously, he held out his hand, and then dropped it, feeling that they would not want to shake hands. However, they both insisted on doing so.

"Well, here we are again," said Martin with unnatural heartiness, "after all these years. Let me see how long is it? Twenty-three? Twenty-five?"

"We were here last in the summer of 1912," said Diana.

Her voice sounded unnatural too, and as he looked at her he thought of those manikins in clothes-shop windows. She wore good clothes, and she wore them well, but she did not look alive.

"I'm sorry for the reason that's brought you here," he said politely, "but I hope Mrs. Laurelwood will soon be quite well again."

"Oh, she's enormously improved," said Martin. "We've just been in to see her. Children, Nanny wants you to come in to tidy for lunch."

"Oh, must we?" wailed Tim.

"I'm not hungry," said Angela. "I've been eating some of the chicken mash and it's much nicer than anything we get indoors."

"Angela!" cried Diana. "Who ever let you do that?" Her eyes flashed at Dick, then round the yard in search of June and Arthur, who had vanished.

"I never see'd her do it," said Dick, his tongue tripping into the old ways of speech, as it always did when he was alarmed, "but if she did it won't do her harm."

"It'll do me good," said Angela primly, "perhaps make me lay eggs. Oh, dear, here's Nanny."

Nanny Wheeler had come in person to collect her strays.

"Now it's ten minutes to one. You've just time—"

"But, Nanny," from Tim, "I want to show Daddy my rabbit."

"You can do that after you've had your dinner."

"But I want to now. Daddy, it's so interesting. Arthur brought his buck to see her this morning and they played together; and did you know that when rabbits play like that there's going to be little baby rabbits in a month's time?"

Dick saw another look, flashed this time between Martin and

Diana. Martin was about to speak, but before he could begin Nanny Wheeler intervened.

"Now, Tim," she said in her comfortable voice, "you know that's all nonsense. Rabbits are born like everyone else, under gooseberry bushes. Didn't we see a rabbit in the kitchen garden only the other day?"

"Yes, but Arthur said—"

"He was only joking. You shouldn't be such a baby. Now come in at once, both of you. I never saw such hands."

They were whisked away, leaving the three grownups standing together. Dick was bewildered and a little shocked. Why had their nurse told the children that ridiculous lie? Diana said to Martin, "We ought to go in too," but before they could move Bess came round the corner of the barn.

"Oh, here you are. I'm glad you've met at last." She smiled at the three of them and seemed pleased. "I was telling Dick he ought to go in to the new part and see you, but he was too shy."

Martin repeated his gambit.

"Well, it was all a very long time ago."

"We've just been over to Morghew," said Diana brightly. "How they've changed, Sir Humphrey and Lady Mallender. I never should have known them."

"She must have changed a lot," said Bess. "She was only a little girl when you were here last. I remember how you all used to go to tea at the vicarage, and at Morghew Hall too."

She looked at Dick, as if she was trying to bring him into the conversation, but there was nothing he could take hold of.

"We'd better be going in," said Martin. "I expect lunch is ready."

"It will be on the table in two minutes. I just ran out to make sure Dick was back." She was still looking at him. She wanted him to make a good show of himself, and he wished desperately he were more able. But he could not find a word to say as the two Laurelwoods walked off. Then at the corner of the yard Diana suddenly turned and smiled at him.

He was surprised. At first he thought it could not be for him, but looking round he saw that Bess had disappeared. He was alone and she had smiled. Why had she done that? It couldn't have any connection with what had happened all those years ago, and he didn't think she could find him particularly worth smiling at as he was now. But it had been a deliberate, conscious smile.

His mouth seemed to fill with a bitter taste, as if the pang in



his heart had soured his stomach. After all those years it was no more than a physical pang. Her smile meant nothing to him now—it could not revive the past. She was like a dressed-up doll, and old . . . for all her young looks she seemed old, older than Bess, older than Emmy. An old doll . . . He could hardly believe that he had ever loved her and broken his heart over her. Why had she smiled?

Diana had smiled because, standing there in the yard talking to Dick, she had suddenly seen him in a more becoming light—more becoming to herself—than she would have thought possible. There had always been an element of shame in her memory of him; the episode was different and apart from any other love experience in her life. She seemed to have walked out of herself, “forgotten herself,” been “beside herself.” No real, recognizable Diana had ever been held in Dick’s arms. That for many years had been her attitude toward the creature whom the moon had made.

She had feared that to meet Dick again would enlarge this feeling, and swallow even the small kernel of vanity which had survived. In a small way she had been proud, though ashamed, of Dick. He had loved her, he stood in her list of men whose desire for her had made her desirable in her own eyes. But if she was to meet him again as a drunken, shambling sot . . . Maud Mallender had spoken of the “dipsomaniac brother,” and before she had heard any gossip about him Meg had said “You could tell by his looks.” It had been a pleasant surprise to see him as a still personable man, a little older looking than his years, perhaps, but certainly not with the red nose and bleary eyes she had dreaded.

Then, as she watched him there, so humble, so diffident, so anxious to please, she had grown warm with the thought that this man, unlike Humphrey Mallender, had not forgotten her. In his case she could not believe that the adventure which had meant so much to her had meant nothing to him. On the contrary, it had meant more than she had ever imagined. She saw it all now. Those bouts of drunkenness which had seemed to lie as an added slur upon her memories now lit them up with a new pride. He had drunk to forget her; and he had never married—not because, as Meg said, no decent girl would take him, but because, since he could not have her, he would have nobody. The self-esteem which Humphrey Mallender had wounded revived warm and singing in her heart. So she had smiled at him.

She indulged in these thoughts during luncheon, under cover of Angela's monologue on Violet Squesham, about whose doings she was always especially communicative at meals. The children were used to having their midday dinner with their grandmother, and, as this saved labor, the custom was maintained at Idolsfold.

But all three elders felt relieved when the last spoonful of pudding had been swallowed and Violet's adventures as bareback rider in a circus merged without change of tone or pause for breath into "For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful."

"When they've had their rest, Nanny," said Martin, "I want them to go out for a walk. It will do them good to walk up to the village."

"Oh, Daddy, I want to play with my rabbit" . . . "Oh, Daddy, I want to play with June and Arthur."

"But I want you to have a walk. It's much better for you than hanging about the place."

"We don't hang—"

"Now, Angela, that's enough"—from Nanny Wheeler—"We'll go upstairs and read some more about Babar, and then we'll have ever such a nice walk into Copstreet and look at the shops."

"I don't want to look at the shops. That's like being in Tunbridge Wells. I want to be like being here."

"The shops here aren't a bit like the shops at Tunbridge Wells," said Meg intervening. "Look, here's sixpence for each of you, and I want you to spend it at the post office."

"On stamps?"

"No, of course not—not on stamps. On toys. Ask them if they have any toy watches with animals that go round and round when you wind."

"Oh, would they?"

The children's faces had changed, their eyes were large with interest.

"They did when I was a little girl. They cost twopence then, but the price will have gone up. You see if you can find one."

"I do hope we will. Come on, Nanny, let's get the rest over quick and go out. Oh, I do hope we'll find an animal watch. Violet Squesham has a—"

The door shut and Martin turned to Meg.

"Very good of you, my dear girl, I'm sure."

"Well, poor little blighters, it's dull for them having to go for

a walk with Nanny when they'd so much rather play with the Hovenden children."

"I don't approve of all this playing with the Hovenden children. They're beginning to pick up things. You heard what Tim said about those rabbits, Diana?"

"Yes, I did. He seems to have actually looked on the mating."

"Well, I don't like it. Arthur Hovenden evidently isn't to be trusted."

"I don't see what harm it can do Tim," said Meg, "even if he has seen rabbits mating. He'll be going to his prep school in a year's time, and he'd far better know one or two things first."

"But not that way."

"It seems to me a very good way—much better than a sex talk from papa."

Martin turned red.

"Really, Meg, you needn't say that. And it isn't only his finding out things that I object to. It's the whole tone of their games. If I don't look after them, those Hovenden brats will turn them into oafs."

"Why should they? The Lardners didn't turn *us* into oafs, and we saw very much more of them."

"But we weren't on those terms."

"Oh, nonsense, Martin. We were on those terms exactly—I with Bess, Diana with Emmy, and you with Dick and Clarence."

Martin grew irritable.

"You can speak for yourself, but I certainly never played with Dick and Clarence the way those children were playing in the yard this morning. In fact, I don't think I ever played with them at all. They were always working."

"No doubt, but you worked with them and had a lot of fun."

"Hardly ever."

"Whenever you could. And Father and Mother took the same view of it as you do now—so Diana was telling me yesterday."

"Diana knows nothing about it. I used sometimes to go with Dick and Clarence because there was nobody else of my own age round here, and I may have talked of farming the way boys talk—"

"Oh . . . so you did want to be a farmer."

Martin became furious.

"A farmer—don't talk nonsense. I never wanted to be a farmer. I haven't your taste for low company."

Meg laughed to cover the embarrassment with which she

realized that unwittingly she must have touched the spring of some psychological jack-in-the-box. She wondered what she should do now to avert a quarrel. Luckily that was the moment Bess Hovenden chose to come in and clear the table, and by common consent they made her talk to them till the temperature of their thoughts had cooled.

"It was nice to meet Dick again this morning," said Diana.

Bess looked pleased.

"I knew he'd be glad to see you, but he'd never go out to look for you, so to speak. He's too shy."

"Is he still interested in pictures?" asked Meg. "I remember how years ago you used to give him the brush paintings you did at school."

"Yes, so I did. He always was the one for anything pretty, even if only made by a child. Your father offered to teach him to paint himself, you know, but Dad wouldn't have it—said it would put him off his work. Sometimes I think it was a pity, but I daresay he'd never have properly learned, not like your father."

"I wonder," said Meg.

"Your father always was a fine painter. Every day he'd go out with his paints and his easel, or sit in the orchard or in the yard. There can't be a thing about the place he didn't paint one time or another. Dick's got a whole collection of his pictures."

"Dick has?"

"Yes; hanging in his room. When your father went away that last time he left a whole lot of pictures behind. Generally he'd take them all away to London, but that last year for some reason he left them lying in the corner of the greenhouse, as if he wanted them thrown away. But Dick 'ud never throw away anything like that, and he picked them all up and kept them in his room. He was nearly a year making frames for them."

"And they're still there."

"Yes. He'd be proud to show them to you if you'd care to have a look."

Meg began to murmur something noncommittal, but Diana covered her voice.

"We'd love to. I was always particularly interested in my father's painting. I used to go out with him and sit by him while he worked."

"I remember. You'd go on your bicycles."

"He hardly painted at all after we stopped coming here. Scotland didn't seem to inspire him in the same way. Those sketches your brother has must be almost the last he ever did."

"Well, Dick would be proud to show them to you. Any time you like."

"We'll drop in after tea, if we may."

Bess beamed and was still beaming when she went out of the room.

She had always wanted Dick to get to know the Laurelwoods again. It did him good to be with people who didn't know about his failing. He liked being with the children, of course, but it wasn't the same thing, and he was afraid of old Mrs. Laurelwood, who certainly didn't know what to talk to him about.

It would be nice if he could show his pictures to the brother and sisters, and it would create a good impression. His room was in many ways the best-looking room in the house. Not when he was in for one of his turns, of course—she'd be sorry for anyone to see it or him then. But just out of one, as he was now, he was safe for a week or two and had made things nice again. He was queer about that. She had never known that a fellow who went on the booze could be so particular, always wanting things just so. It was more like a woman than a man, and when she thought of how George always threw his things about and left everything in such a mess, so that she was always tidying up for him, it seemed odd that Dick, whom she had seen in depths of degradation that George shuddered at, should be in his proper self so neat, so orderly, so fond of pretty things.

He was always the first—often the only one—to notice if she had on anything nice or new, and he liked to be asked to help her when she chose patterns for curtains or wallpaper. He nearly always had a bunch of flowers in his room. Sometimes George laughed at him and said he was sissy, but Bess would always scold him for this. What they needed was for Dick to want things nice—it was one of the things they had to hold him by—and George was not to mock him out of it.

Dick did not, however, seem pleased when she told him of the arrangement she had made.

"What? Show them my pictures? Who? All three?"

"Yes, I take it they'll all three be coming, and they're their father's pictures."

"I don't know that my room's fit to be seen."

"Oh, yes it is, Dick. It was all nicely set this morning and I went in again this afternoon just to give some of the furniture a shine."

He frowned over the shaking edge of his teacup.

"Come, now," coaxed Bess, "it'll be nice for you naving them to look at your pictures, and you can pick a bunch of my daffs to put on the chest of drawers."

"Thank you," he said slowly. "What time will they come?"

"After tea, they said. I expect it'll be around six o'clock. Anyway, you pick your flowers and go upstairs, and when they're ready I'll bring them up."

He rose, still frowning at the prospect of visitors, but smiling at the thought of the daffodils.

Martin refused to go.

"Really, I don't want to look at Father's throwouts, and I don't particularly want to see Dick Lardner either."

Meg looked at Diana.

"What made you let us in for this?"

"I thought it would be nice to see the pictures Father painted the last summer we were here. Of course neither you nor Martin took the slightest interest in them, but I did, and I do still."

"Well, if you go I may as well go too, but it will be depressing if they're any worse than those Mother has at Tunbridge Wells."

"Why should they be?"

"Because Father left them behind. He can't have thought much of them himself if he did that."

"Dick Lardner evidently admires them, and it would be a kindness to encourage him in that sort of way."

"You ought to come, Martin," said Meg. "You were Dick's friend, not Diana or me."

"I never was his friend. I do wish you'd stop that nonsense. But I do happen to be my children's father and my mother's son. It's my intention to play with the children now while she's asleep and then to go and sit with her when she wakes up."

"A well-planned evening" said Meg crisply.

"It's what I came here for, not to be matey with the Lardners."

Meg said, "I shall go to see Mother myself directly she's had her rest. I don't suppose this picture gallery will occupy us more than half an hour, if that."

"Well, I'm going to play with the children. It's time they were taken in hand."

"Does Nanny know?"

"Yes, she's bringing them in when they've had their tea."

Nanny Wheeler thoroughly approved of Martin's desire to super-

wise his children's evening games. Though it had been convenient to have them taken off her hands by the young Hovendens, especially when Mrs. Laurelwood's illness made so many extra demands on her time, she had not willingly forsaken the routine according to which every evening after tea Tim and Angela were "changed" and sent down to their grandmother for civilized entertainment.

Only a few moments after Diana and Meg had gone off to see Dick Lardner's pictures, two almost unrecognizably immaculate beings entered the room.

"Hullo, Daddy," said Tim. "I hear you want to play with us."

"May June and Arthur come in?" asked Angela. "They sometimes do."

"Not this evening," said Martin.

"Why?"

"We've seen enough of June and Arthur for today."

"Oh, no, Daddy, we couldn't ever see enough of them. I mean to marry Arthur when I grow up."

"Now, don't talk nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense. If I married him I could live here always."

Martin took fright. He saw his daughter following the deplorable example of her aunt, whose communistic tendencies he now attributed solely to her childhood's infatuation for Bess Lardner. But he tried to be moderate.

"This is a very nice place to come to for a change of air, but it's not a place to stay in long. You'd soon get tired of it."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't. All the Squeshams live here all the year round and they never get tired."

"Chaffield promised," said Tim, "that when we come back here in August he'll let me ride with him on the reaper."

"But you won't be coming back in August. I'm taking you both to Yorkshire."

The decision and its utterance were practically simultaneous.

"Oh, no Daddy—no!" they both screamed. "We're coming here. Granny said so. She's booked the rooms."

"I'm sure she'd let you come too, if you like," added Tim.

"No thank you, and I shall speak to your grandmother"—then seeing a storm gathering on their faces, and fearing both thunder and rain, he said hastily—"but don't worry, children. I promise you a lovely holiday."

"Then it'll be here," said Tim.

"Granny 'ull never change her mind," said Angela.

And Martin let it go at that.

"What are we going to play?" he asked. "We haven't got much time."

Angela said, "Let's have Dumb Crambo."

"Silly!" from Tim. "We couldn't have that with only three."

"Then let's get June and Arthur."

"No, no," said Martin, "there are plenty of games that can be played by only three."

"What?"

"Well—er—what do you play at with Granny?"

"Oh, Granny reads to us; or sometimes she pretends she's ill and lies on the sofa, and we're the doctor and the nurse."

The second of these choices seemed the more attractive to Martin.

"All right, we'll play that. I'll lie down on the sofa. See, like this . . ."

He lay down, pulling his mother's rug over himself and emitting a hollow groan.

"How funny you look, Daddy. Let's see what's the matter with you. I'm going to listen to your heart."

Some horseplay followed, from which Martin extricated himself with difficulty.

"That's not the way a doctor behaves—or a nurse, either. They're both ever so quiet, and talk in whispers and go in and out of the room on tiptoe."

This seemed a good idea to the children, who indulged in a lot of noisy whispering, with some squeaking of shoes.

"He's better now," said Tim, drawing up the rug over his father's face.

"Go to sleep, dear," said Angela, thumping his head, "I'm going to make you some Bengers."

Silence followed, first welcome, then ominous. Martin peeped out over the edge of the rug and saw that the room was empty.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Children! Angela and Tim! Where are you?"

There was no answer, though the door stood open. He went out and looked into the next room, but it was empty. He couldn't shout in the passage, for fear of disturbing his mother, so after an abortive search of the night nursery he went reluctantly through into the old part. No one was to be seen, but after walking through the two empty old-fashioned rooms that seemed to have no special function in the economy of Idolsfold, he found Mrs. Hovenden in the dining room, laying the nurse's meal.



"Can you tell me, are the children anywhere about? They were with me a minute or two ago, but I've lost sight of them."

"I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Laurelwood"—how he hated those inferiors who called him "Mr. Laurelwood" instead of "sir"—"I haven't seen them at all this evening. Perhaps they're in the yard."

She went through into a little room at the back of the kitchen and looked out of the window.

"Yes, there they are," she said equably, "with June and Arthur."

Groaning, Martin dashed for the back door, and after a disconcerting entrance into the old part w.c., found himself with the culprits in the yard. Most unfortunately his arrival coincided with that of Nanny Wheeler, who had just caught sight of them from the nursery window.

"Oh, sir, how could you allow such a thing?" her words were respectful, but her gaze dragged him back shamefaced twenty-five years.

"I-I didn't allow it," he stammered. "I-I wasn't looking and they gave me the slip."

"If I'd known this was likely to happen I'd never have let Angela wear her pretty new frock. You're both very naughty children. Come in and at once, and I can tell you there'll be only plain biscuits for supper tonight."

"Oh, Nanny," wailed Angela, "we did so want to play with June and Arthur. Daddy doesn't know how to play properly."

"I told them they were not to play with June and Arthur any more today."

"We weren't playing," said Tim, "we were watching the new boar arrive. He's in there. He's awful fierce."

Martin asked frigidly, "Is Mrs. Laurelwood ready for me now?"

"Yes, sir, if you would like to go up. Say good night to Daddy, children, and come in at once."

His son and daughter embraced him effusively.

"Good night, darling, darling Daddy," cried Angela, evidently anxious to atone for her harsh words about him as a playmate.

"Good night, Daddy, and do go in there to see the boar before you go up to see Granny. If you scratch him you'll get out lots of dandruff. Oh, Daddy, I do so want to be a farmer when I grow up."

Only his mother's room had comfort for him, and that was tempered by his inability to speak to her of what was at the moment next his heart. Did she really mean to bring the children

to Idolsfold again in August? Had she really booked the rooms? Did she really mean to start the whole thing over again?

A pang went through him—an old pang, remembered. He saw himself standing in the top room of his parents' house in Collingham Gardens, a sort of nondescript room where Meg did her homework and where he kept his books and tools. It was toward the end of the Easter holidays and his mother had just told him that they were not going to Idolsfold that summer.

"We're going to Scotland instead. Father and I both think that it's time you children saw more of the world, and as Diana is engaged to Bertie French it will be nice for all of us to spend our holidays with him and his family."

"But I don't want to go to Scotland."

He had blurted out the words in a sort of furious agony, as the sunny picture in his mind became suddenly dark: Idolsfold with its oasts and barns, the yard, the orchard, the fields, the animals—all suddenly wiped out by this clumsy, senseless gesture of a parent's hand.

"I don't want to go to Scotland."

"Oh, Martin, don't be silly. Of course you do. You'll simply love climbing the mountains and fishing in the burn, and seeing all that wonderful new country."

"I shan't. I want to go back to Idolsfold. I like it there, and I shan't like it in Scotland."

But he had liked it. Even before they went he had learned to like it, because his friends at Marlborough envied him for going there as they had never envied him at Idolsfold. He had soon found out that the journey would cost a lot and would involve sleeping in the train. The holiday would be something high class, with the Laurelwoods and the Frenches sharing a manse between them and bringing up a joint selection of their servants. He had never thought his father could afford anything so grand.

So he had forgotten Idolsfold, except in his dreams, and his children would do the same; indeed, more easily, for they had stayed there only once instead of fourteen times. But his mother must not be allowed to start the whole thing over again. She must not bring them back in August. He would have to fix up something else, find some place where they could forget what they had begun to learn. The first inspiration had been Yorkshire, but anywhere would do. He had heard that Cromer was a suitable place for children, bracing air and lots of sand . . .

"What's the matter, dear? You look worried."

His mind ran up and down many lanes of thought. There was probably no one in less need of the injunction to "think before you speak." Whatever he may have been as a boy, he was now completely a lawyer. At the present moment there was something he very much wanted to say, but he feared that it might lead to an emotional tension which would not be good for his mother. However, he could make a start that would commit him no further if he saw she was upset.

"Mother, I don't think I've ever thanked you as I ought for your goodness to my children."

"Darling, don't look so solemn about it. I love having them. I felt so lonely when you all grew up and left me."

"But I've been thinking. I don't want to avoid my responsibilities, and I think perhaps I ought to see more of them than I do. They seem, if I may say so, very much attached to me."

"Oh, they are. That's the ex- — I mean, they'd be overjoyed if you could come and join us here in the summer. I know that apart from holidays you're much too busy—unless your stupid old mother gets ill and you have to come and see her. But you always take a few weeks off in August, and I was thinking only the other day just before I got ill that it would be nice if you could spend them here and give the children a real chance to know you."

Her eagerness and obvious pleasure in the idea made him hesitate over explaining himself.

"I didn't—I hadn't thought—I mean, what I wanted to say was . . . My idea is this. I'd thought of taking the children off your hands for a bit. You have them with you always. They *must* tire you. But if I took them, say, to Cromer in August, while you come here . . ."

"Martin, I should hate it. It's having them here that I enjoy so much—here at Idolsfold, where we all used to be. I can't tell you how I used to love our summer holidays here all together."

"Then why did you stop coming?"

The opening had been so wide that even Martin could not resist going through it, but he was sorry the next moment. His mother's voice changed, sharpened.

"Surely you know why. Diana had just got engaged to poor Hubert and we joined his family in Scotland. Then it became a regular thing."

There was a flush on her cheeks, the flush that seemed to climb

from her throat into her cheekbones and then glow as light in her eyes. He must be careful.

"Of course, mother, I see. And don't worry about the children. I only wanted to relieve you."

"But I don't want to be relieved. I love having them, especially here at Idolsfold. I spoke to Bess about the rooms only a few days ago, and she said they have no summer bookings yet. You'll join us for at least a part of the time. Won't you, dear?"

A knock at the door came just in time to spare him a reply.

"Who's there?"

Meg and Diana were already in the room.

"Hullo, Mother darling. Is it all right for us to come in now?"

"Perfectly all right. Don't go, Martin. I like having you all together."

"Are you sure three isn't too many for you?"

"Of course not, when the three are my own children." She laughed happily. "Tell me, what have you girls been doing this afternoon?"

Diana said, "We've just been looking at some of Father's pictures."

"Yes," said Meg, "Dick Lardner has a whole gallery of them hanging in his bedroom and Bess Hovenden was very anxious we should see them before we went away."

"Really! I wonder how he got hold of them. Your father may have given him one or two, but not more."

"Apparently Father left these behind that last summer he was here, and Dick found them. There must be twenty-five at least."

"Oh." It seemed to Martin as if his mother's face became wary. Her bright eyes, hitherto fixed on her three children moved away, as if they followed a secret journey of her mind.

"Yes," she said after a pause, "I remember. He very much disliked the work he did here that summer and wouldn't take it back with him. I think his power was beginning to fail him. You know he never painted any more after that year."

"But the odd thing is," said Meg, "that some of these pictures are much better than anything else of his I've seen."

"And there's one," said Diana, "that's a figure piece. I didn't know he ever painted figures."

"I expect he painted a great many pictures, dear, that you didn't see."

Mrs. Laurelwood spoke in the gently reproving tone she had used

more often thirty years ago. But if she expected it to silence Diana now she was mistaken.

"Oh, but, Mother, I actually saw him paint this one—at least the background. He did it the day after we arrived that last summer, over at Pigeon Hoo. I was with him and he certainly didn't paint her then. He must have put her in afterward. But he met her there—Mrs. Brown, the curate's wife. Do you remember her?"

"Yes, I remember her."

"She was very striking, very bad style. But there's something rather impressive about this picture, isn't there, Meg?"

"I certainly think it's better than anything of his that Mother has at home."

"I wonder if Dick would let her have it."

Mrs. Laurelwood moved restlessly.

"I don't want it, dear. Don't worry him about it."

"But, Mother, I really think it's the best thing Father ever did. It has more color and vividness than anything else of his I've seen. And as for Dick, I'm sure he'd give it to you if I asked him."

"Why you especially?" asked Meg.

"I think he's fallen for me."

She bit her lip, for she had nearly said "again."

"I saw no evidence of it," said Meg coolly, and Martin exclaimed, "Really, Diana!" But Mrs. Laurelwood seemed to enjoy the turn the conversation had taken.

"You never know. Diana's looking very nice. I like that new tweed suit, dear. But I expect Dick's really thinking of you as a little girl. He was just about your age, you know, and I daresay he worshiped you from afar."

"I doubt," said Meg, "if any of the Lardners worshiped us as much as we worshiped them."

"I'm sure I never worshiped, as you call it—" began Martin, but Diana's voice cut across his, returning to a pleasant subject.

"I really think I will ask Dick for that picture, Mother. I do want you to have it. You've got nothing that Father painted that last summer, so your collection isn't complete."

"I've plenty of others, though; landscapes, which I like better. Your father didn't like those pictures, and that's enough for me."

Again her voice shook, and Martin said, "Mother's tired."

"No, dear, not really. But I think it's getting near the time when Nurse comes back, and I'm afraid she won't be pleased to find so many in the room."

"We'd better all go," said Meg.

His mother really must be tired, Martin thought, for she made no effort to detain them.

Dick sat on his bed, and the dusk crept round him. The sunset rays by which he had shown his pictures had long ago sunk behind the oast barn, but he did not switch on the light. His eyes were fixed on the cold fading sky, waiting for the star that he knew he would suddenly see hanging just above the roofs. His mind was empty of thought, yet he seemed to feel it working, gathering to itself all the tatters of comfort that flew from the colors in the sky, the blue that dipped into green and the green that dipped into purple and the purple that dipped into crimson on the edge of the black barns; from the colors in the room, where a few roses still dyed the walls among the pictures that were no longer pictures, but little mirrors, little lakes of the last light, while the bedspread lay like a green meadow round his hunched figure.

He must hold these colors, this beauty, some of which God had made and some of which he had made himself. "I remember," she had said, "you always used to like beautiful things." No, no; he must not remember what she had said. It would spoil everything, spoil every chance of holding the things that could save him. Her smile would come between him and the colors of the sky—that hateful, silly smile. Why had she smiled at him? She had smiled like that twice at least; probably more, for in the end he had looked at her feet so that he should not see her smile.

She had smiled as if she wanted to remind him of something, as if there were a secret between them. He knew what it was, but he could not think why she should want to remember it or want him to remember. Of course she did not know about his failing, but even so, why should she smile? She was a well-to-do, middle-aged lady with a husband and children of her own. The thing that had happened twenty-odd years ago could mean nothing to her, even if it had ever meant anything, which he did not think it had. Why did she smile? Her smile did not suit her; it made her look old and artificial and rather silly. He could not understand her. She was so different from what she had been all those years ago. She had been a person then—not a kind person or a good person or a faithful person, but a real person. Now she was not a person at all.

Well, he had better stop puzzling his head over her. Thinking of her made him feel weak and ill, and that might lead to trouble.

He must stop thinking of her and go down and help Bess in the kitchen. But why had Bess asked him to show her and her sister those pictures? He hadn't wanted to. He hadn't wanted to have her like this in his room, looking about her and touching things and asking him questions and smiling. Her presence seemed to lie like a faint smear on it now. She wasn't real, she wasn't a person, she wasn't that person he could never forget.

The room was quite dark now, except for a single ghost of light which was Bess's daffodils. He slid off the bed, and went over to them, laying his cheek against their freshness and breathing in their sweetness with closed eyes.

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## DICK LARDNER

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THE FIRST THING DICK COULD REMEMBER WAS SITTING WITH HIS mother in the orchard at Idolsfold. He saw a picture of them there. Over their heads was an arch of pink appleblossom, and some of the petals had fallen on his mother's gown, which was gray and flowed out round her over the grass. He sat on it as on a carpet, leaning against her side. He was looking up into her face, which smiled sweetly down on him, and her hair was lit up with sunshine. The sun lit up her hair till it was like the golden hearts of the appleblossom, but above the trees was a gray cloud the color of her gown.

When he grew up he sometimes wondered if that memory was real—if things had really looked so bright, so sweet, so clear, as if lit up from within rather than from without. When he stopped being a child that clearness seemed to have stopped too, and things were thick and hazy like a glass that has been breathed on. Even the marsh in autumn, with the floodwater spreading to the fiery slope of Plurenden Wood, even the laneside in spring, with its starring of primroses, or the coppice pools where the shadows of trees wove with the yellow flags, did not seem to hold all that magic of life and beauty which shone in the past. He saw, too, his mother stooping about the kitchen, or going off to Rushmonden with her market basket, or sitting hard and upright in their pew on Sunday, and he found it hard to believe that she had ever had hair like golden stamens or skin like a petal or eyes like a gray cloud.



But he would not let himself think like this for long. Something very important seemed to depend on his memory being real and not a dream. To doubt it would mean not only loss but surrender—surrender to a world of Hovendens. He would rather believe that his mother and the orchard still really looked like that, under the shadow of his breath on the glass.

The Hovendens had come to stand for all that separated him from the things he wanted to enjoy—for all that was coarse and ugly and frightening in his life. The world seemed to be full of them, Hovendens of all ages, following him down the years. At school they had tried to prevent him listening to the teacher when she was telling them delightful stories about Orlando and Rosalind in the Forest of Arden or about a great blue ocean full of pink coral islands. Bob and Percy Hovenden had made rude snuffling noises or even kicked his shins. They hated to see him listening to the teacher—they called him sappy babby—and they hated him to pick flowers for her. They watched him when the primroses were out and if they saw him pick any on the way to school they would rush at him and snatch them away and trample on them. If Joe saw them he would cuff their heads and make them let him alone, but there was a bigger Hovenden, Jass, who sometimes came along and was a match for Joe; and anyway Joe had left school some years before he did, so that he was at their mercy.

He hated the Hovendens, even the girls. Nellie Hovenden had once dragged him into the corner of the playground and whispered something in his ear which he could not understand, but which had frightened him mysteriously. And Dot Hovenden had stolen Tommy Kemp's ruler and said she had seen Dick take it. Then one day a dreadful thing had happened. Ivy Hovenden was playing with matches and her pinafore caught fire. A great red and yellow flame had shot up out of her lap and above it he had seen her face twisted into a dreadful shape. He was only seven, and he had felt as if a huge hand was holding him, so that he could not move or run away, but had to watch her burning. Then a man had jumped over the fence and put her out with his coat, and at the same time the hand had pushed Dick down to the ground and held him there.

Ivy was taken to hospital, where she soon got better, though she would always have an ugly mark on her face, where the flame had reached it. But Dick had lain on the ground for a long, long time before his family realized he had not come home from school and sent Joe to find him. In the confusion and excitement about Ivy no

one had seen him lying there where the hand had pushed him down.

He had gone to bed, just as if he had been Ivy, and had stayed there quite a number of days, drinking nasty stuff the doctor ordered. He thought it was to make him forget, but he did not forget. Joe thought he was silly, and so did all the Hovendens, and so did his father, and even his mother and Emmy. Why should he be so frightened because Ivy, who was too big to play with him or notice him much, had set herself on fire? It was for Ivy to be frightened, and her father and mother, or even her brothers and sisters, but not he. He was soft, he was a milksop. That was the truth of it.

When he grew up he realized that the Hovendens were very much more useful in the world than he was. The Hovendens worked well. Dad often said he wished he had a Hovenden to work for him instead of Dick. Jass and Bob and Tom and Perce and George never wasted their time picking moon daisies, or fretted over the calves that were taken from their dams. They did not spoil sock lambs, so that afterward, when they went to the fields with the other tegs they were always trying to come back to the house; they did not fuss on market days about animals in crates and nets or carry hens ridiculously in their arms instead of hanging from their fists.

Dick accepted his inferior position, and as he was always humble and good tempered nobody ever quarreled with him much at home. He was useful, too, in August, with the Laurelwoods. It was he whom Dad and Mother put in charge of the little garden outside the new part. They knew that he would keep it neat and gay, as no one else at Idolsfold would do. Mrs. Laurelwood often praised Dick's flowers.

The Laurelwoods stood at the opposite poles of his life from the Hovendens. They represented a world of interest and beauty, which existed only in the summer. In summer they came to Idolsfold with their nice, well-fitting clothes, their clean hands and faces, their shining hair, their gentle voices and courteous manners. Nothing about any of them, at any age, was rough or terrifying. Nanny Wheeler was a bit of a dragon, but she was never coarse or rude; Mrs. Laurelwood always spoke to him nicely, and Mr. Laurelwood seemed to open a world of beauty with his paintings. The little girls were pretty and dainty, even when they screamed and ran about, and Martin was another doorkeeper with a golden key.

Martin had always been his own special companion among the

Laurelwoods. When Emmy went with Diana, and Bess with Meg, he went with Martin. Clarence went too, because he and Martin were more of an age than Martin and Dick, but he was not interested, like Dick, in Martin's books. He played with them and worked with them and went with them on expeditions to the neighboring farms, but it was Dick and Martin who walked about alone, discussing *Treasure Island* or *Moby Dick* or *Round the World in Eighty Days* or the latest serial in the *Boys' Own Paper*.

Martin liked stories about adventure. He did not care for the poetry that Dick read whenever he could find it. But a book was a book; any book was worth reading, and talking about a book would start a deep excitement, a wonderful feeling of friendship and secret knowledge. Martin's books were as glorious in their way as Mr. Laurelwood's pictures.

The first thing Dick always asked Martin every summer when he arrived was, "What books have you brought?"

That summer of 1912 Martin had brought a book called *The First Men on the Moon* and a bound volume of *Our Boys*.

"It's got a wonderful serial in it," he said. "I read it at Christmas, but I'd like to read it again. It's about two boys called Lance and Michael, and some wicked professors who invent a bomb to blow the world to pieces. They do it, and Lance and Michael are left alone on a little piece about the size of Kent. It's their world, and they have a wonderful time on it, trapping and hunting and building their own house out of the ruins, until one of the professors turns up—"

"Is it really Kent?"

"Well, roughly. Of course all the buildings are destroyed, but the trees and the fields remain—anything with roots to hold it into the earth; and there are animals, too, which somehow escaped."

"I don't believe it could happen."

"Oh, yes it could. There's a whole lot of worlds like that, called the asteroids, going round and round the sun between Mars and Jupiter. Astronomers think that they're parts of a big world like ours that got split up for some reason."

"Do Lance and Michael get rid of the professor?"

"Yes, but after lots of adventures. They find some girls in the end, and their father and mother. I don't care for that part."

"I shouldn't like to live on a world as small as Kent. I mean, if Kent was rolled up into a ball it would be very small indeed. I like

to think of all the fine things there are on the other side of the world—coral islands and volcanos and beautiful countries full of hummingbirds and palms.”

“I’d rather be in a small world and have it to ourselves. Think—just you and me. Then I’d never have to go back to London, it wouldn’t be there.”

Dick tried to picture himself in a tiny world alone with Martin.

“I think I’d like to have Mother and Dad there, and Joe and Bess.”

“I shouldn’t. They wouldn’t let us do what we liked. Let’s pretend this summer that you and I are alone in a world the size of Kent. We’ll set out from Idolsfold and walk till we come right round to it again. And we’ll choose where the equator’s to be, and the North and South Pole.”

“We’ll have to have Clarence with us. He’d never stand for being left out.”

“He can come along too. It’ll be a world with three inhabitants.”

It seemed to Dick that Martin was very young for his age. He had never considered this before, because though Martin was nearly four years younger he had learned such a lot at school that he was always telling Dick things he did not know. But all this was nonsense, childish nonsense. It brushed aside realities and possibilities in the same way that children did in their games.

“Will there be any professors?” he asked. “We might have the Hovendens to be professors and dodge them about.”

That gave a point to the game, but even while he suggested it he realized that he did not particularly want to play it. He was too old to go about pretending silly things. He was turned eighteen, grown up, and he wanted to do grown-up things like reading and painting. He felt vaguely disappointed—he had not expected this gap of years suddenly to appear between himself and Martin. It had not been there in other summers. Up till now he had always joined uncritically in Martin’s plans. But this year he found himself wishing there was a Laurelwood closer to him in age. Of course there was Diana, who was even a few months older, but she was a girl.

They were talking about Diana Laurelwood at supper that night.

“Wonderful how she’s turned out,” said Dad.

“She’s a smasher,” said Joe.

Emmy asked, “Have you seen her, Dick?”

He shook his head.

“Well, she’s put up her hair, and in the latest fashion too, and

she's got a hobble skirt, so tight she can hardly walk, and a Merry Widow hat."

Dick's mouth opened. When he had last seen Diana her legs and her hair had both been free and it seemed strange and rather unpleasant to think of them controlled by fashion.

He said, "She must look like Mrs. Brown."

"She does not," said Emmy indignantly.

Joe winked. Lately he had started a habit of winking at Dick, as if he were a man.

"Well," said Joe teasingly, "Mrs. Brown is very well in her way."

"But it's not Miss Diana's way," said Emmy. "She's a lady."

Dick felt gently curious about Diana. He would like to see what she looked like grown up. His ideas on grown-up women were limited. There was his mother and there was Emmy, but he had gathered from the conversation that she was not in the least like either of them. Nor, apparently, was she like Mrs. Brown. Was she, perhaps, like Mrs. Laurelwood? But he could not picture Mrs. Laurelwood in a hobble skirt and a Merry Widow hat. Her clothes were vague and fussy, and she wore her hair in a small, anxious style, which though more elaborate than Emmy's would not have drawn from her such tribute as "the latest fashion." Mrs. Colenutt was like a pillow tied round with string. Diana could not possibly have turned into anything like her. And Lady Mallender was dark and hard and horsey. Beyond them he could think of nobody but Joe's girls, the Beaties and Ivies and Dollies he went with and joked about. But they were cheap skates, who made no attempt to follow the ways of a world from which they were shut out. Diana was as likely to look like a gypsy as like Beaty Fuggle.

The next day his curiosity was satisfied. He saw her talking to Emmy, and at first he thought it was a stranger. Her head looked twice its usual size with all those coils of hair, and by contrast her face looked thinner than it used to be. She wore a fresh white blouse with a stiff collar that almost touched her ears, and a gray skirt buttoning at the side. The bottom buttons were undone and showed him tiny pointed shoes.

She looked quite unapproachable. He wondered how Emmy could be talking to her so freely, and for a time he watched her in silence. Before today he had never thought she was pretty, but now he saw that she was very pretty indeed, and there was about her a freshness, a neatness that fascinated while it frightened him. He would have turned away without speaking if she had not suddenly

looked in his direction. When she saw him she smiled, and when she smiled something seemed to come to him—to come back. The light was suddenly clear again. Oh, you beautiful thing, he thought, you beautiful, beautiful thing.

"Hullo, Dick."

"Good morning, Miss Diana."

It was all he could say. His thoughts seemed to be piling themselves up and choking him. He could only stand and stare and feel awkward.

She began to talk about the balls she had been to, and he thought of her in a dress with silver spangles over it and with roses in her hair. She was like someone in a tale, in a poem. He could not believe she was Diana.

Emmy was evidently anxious to get rid of him. She did not like him standing there so dumb.

"Are you looking for Master Martin?" she asked.

He heard himself talking roughly, uncouthly: "That's right. I thought maybe he was waiting around here. We should ought to start."

He was not really looking for Martin, but he thought it best to pretend he was. Diana told him that Martin would be there in a moment, but when he turned to go away she snatched him back into the conversation.

"Tell me about yourself, Dick. There's a difference in you. You look quite grown up."

What could he say to that? Nothing. He could only blush and hang his head and let Emmy answer for him. She did her best, but he felt a fool and evidently he looked it, for afterward she said: "What made you like that with Miss Diana? You were no better than a dumb image."

"I dunno . . . she looked so changed she scared me."

"She looks different, but she's just about the same underneath," said Emmy coolly.

Dick had never been friendly with Diana, so her being "the same underneath" gave him no confidence. He remembered her dimly as a toddler in an embroidered sunbonnet, then as something rather like a doll in a big lampshade hat, then as a schoolgirl with long black stockings. As none of these had she been approachable, and Martin had always been anxious that she should be left out of their games, in which as she grew older she had sometimes wanted to

join. Perhaps her grown-up looks would have made no difference if she had not seemed so determined to attract his notice. But she was always meeting him and talking to him—not when the others, Martin and Clarence, were by, but when he was alone. Sometimes you would think that she was doing it on purpose.

He wished she would not notice him so particularly. He was bound to feel awkward with anyone so beautiful, so changed and assured as she; and he could not understand why she wanted to talk to him. They had nothing in common. The things she talked about were mostly things of which he had no knowledge. He had never danced or been to London parties, he could not play tennis and knew nothing about ladies' clothes. Sometimes she seemed to be showing off. But why show off to him, Dick Lardner? He could not understand it, and he would have avoided her if she had not been so beautiful, so unlike the Hovendens.

He wished he could play his part; for though he was embarrassed by her notice he knew that he should be grateful for it, as Emmy was. Emmy was proud and honored to be noticed by Diana, and doubtless he should be the same. But he knew he looked awkward and dumb. It was a wonder that she kept on with him.

Then one day she asked him to clean her bicycle for her. He jumped at the chance. Here was something he really could do. He had always been good at making things look nice; and her beautiful bike, with its new steel and rubber, its black and gold enamel, its modern fittings—so different from the rusty, dingy thing on which he sometimes clanked into Copstreet—was just his opportunity. *He* would show off to *her* for a change. "Dick, you might be an angel and clean my bike." Well, she was the angel and her bike should gleam like an angel's chariot. Nothing new and unsold in Ted Arboys' shop should look so bright.

It was not an easy task, for they were all extremely busy hop-spraying just that day, and he was wanted in the hop gardens. But when evening came he set to work. Diana had never thought of giving him any polish, so he had bought some himself, specially for the handle bars. He rubbed it too over every spoke, so that the chariot should run on silver wheels, and his happy, sweating face looked up at him from the mirror of her bell.

"Oh, Dick, how beautiful! I've never had it cleaned so well before."

He had cleaned himself as well as the bike before he brought it round. He had washed away the smell of the polish and the darkness

it had left under his nails, and he had brushed a load of water over his hair. Something in her smile told him that she was pleased with him as well as the bike.

But still he was dumb. He could not talk to her the way Emmy did, and he still felt a little afraid of her. She and Emmy, he supposed, had common ground on which they could meet, and anyway they had been friendly for years, they had grown up together, as it were, passing together through different stages. He began to wish that he had known her before she was grown up, and wondered what that frilly child, that leggy schoolgirl, had really been like to know. It was because she was so grown up that she scared him; she seemed more grown up than any girl of his own world—even than Emmy, or than Nellie Hovenden, who were both engaged to be married. He wondered that Diana was not engaged.

Emmy sometimes talked of it, with her mother.

"She'll be engaged by the time she comes back next year, you mark my words—engaged if not married."

"I wonder she's not engaged already, with that pretty face."

"Oh, give her time to look about her. She wants to look round."

"Has she had any courting?"

"I can't rightly make out. She talks about young fellows she's met at balls. But of course the ways of the gentry are different in these matters. She'd never go out with anyone."

"He'd come to her home, maybe."

"Only afternoon calls. I don't see how they get to know each other. She's wise to look round and take her time about it."

Dick listened, more shy than ever of Diana, yet vaguely excited too. That night, as he was standing in the yard, waiting for Nimrod the old yard dog to come to his kennel, her window opened suddenly and she looked out. The young moon was still above the roofs behind him, and her face was clear. He saw it looking down on him like the moon out of a cloud of hair. She was looking down and smiling, and somehow with all that hair loose upon her she looked utterly approachable and sweet. He felt that he would no longer be shy if ever impossibly she should speak to him with her hair let down. In fact he could have spoken to her now—called her name through the stillness of the night. But almost at once her arm rose up in a frilled nightgown sleeve and drew a curtain between them. It was queer that what had destroyed his shyness should make her shy.



Dick had always enjoyed the harvest picnic—the only male Lardner who really did so. He liked to feel that, even on a working day, he was as clean and neat as any of the Laurelwoods. The clean new shirt which his mother made him put on did not annoy him, as it annoyed Joe and Clarence, nor did he resent her entreaty “not to let himself get in a sweat.” He washed to his waist after dinner and carefully sleeked his hair with brilliantine. Dad would not grumble at him if he didn’t “go hard” in the field. He knew that injunction about sweating and ruefully accepted a slack afternoon.

This year the occasion brought a tickle of fear with it. He had a feeling that he would not be allowed to sit quietly watching and listening, as he had done other summers. He hoped that Diana would not talk to him too much in front of the others. His tongue would be more slow than ever with his family sitting round. All through the afternoon he felt a quake, and his throat dried up so suddenly that he coughed when he saw the familiar procession of Laurelwoods invade the field.

“Here they come,” said Joe. “What’s the matter, Dick? Swallowed a beetle?”

“A bit of chaff,” said Dick and smoothed his hair.

“Is mine standing up?” asked Joe, flattening a tuft on Clarence’s head.

They tidied frantically, buttoning their collars and pulling down their sleeves. But they would not join the picnic party till all the women of their own family were there. Dad gave parting injunctions to Barnes and Piper, who were not bidden to the feast, and in due course the little group of Lardner men strung itself out across the field.

Dick came last, but hard on Joe’s heels. He wanted a seat beside Granny. She was more likely than anyone to protect him from Diana’s notice, for she would take as much of it as she could to herself. In her world young Laurelwood ladies did not converse with Lardner boys and she would not expect him to utter a word. But, as he arrived at the spread cloth something happened which made him forget his intention and squat suddenly between Bess and Martin. On his way across the field he had looked at nothing but the ground or Joe’s broad back, but now he must lift his eyes and they met Diana’s smiling at him out of a sheaf of loose hair. All the coils and swathes were gone, only a ribbon held back the curls that might have been tumbling on her shoulders. He stared entranced. The schoolgirl had come back, but with such a differ-

ence that she seemed to offer as a gift all the beauty that had been like a fence round the elegant lady. He knew that he too was smiling, and as their smiles met over the tablecloth he felt suddenly released.

He did not say anything. He knew better than to talk to her in front of his family, and to his relief she did not seem inclined to force a conversation. She understood—understood him at last. He could hardly eat for pleasure, and his mind roved, remembering a clump of borage he had seen under the hedge that afternoon. The flowers were blue, with freaks of purple, the color of her frock, the color of her eyes . . . He would pick them and give them to her, and then he would speak.

"I picked them because they were the color of your eyes."

He would say it. He must; he must say something to tell her how beautiful she was, something to tell her a little of what her beauty meant to him. He must not be afraid, now that she had made herself approachable. Had she done it on purpose, for his sake? He could not think that, but neither could he keep silent any longer. He must speak. She ought to know her own loveliness. "I've never seen anyone as beautiful as you." Would he ever dare say that? She was laughing now, laughing as she talked to Granny. He lifted his eyes and looked at her as she looked away. She was like a poem or a picture come to life. Her throat moved and swelled as she spoke, like a bird's when it sings. Then he dragged away his excited mind to the sweetness of those flowers under the hedge. "I picked them because they were the color of your eyes."

Martin pored over the map that he had drawn.

"Rushmonden must be the capital," he said.

"But it wouldn't be there any longer," argued Dick, "not if the world was busted."

"Well, you never know. Of course the places where the explosion occurred would have gone, but a village well away might escape with only a little damage. The inhabitants would all be killed—there was a terrible suction of air, you remember. But I don't see why a strongly built old place like Rushmonden shouldn't stand. Besides, we must have a capital."

He marked Rushmonden in red ink.

Dick tried to think of Kent rolled into a separate world and himself alone with Martin in it. It was a depressing and ridiculous thought. But he admired Martin's map, so beautifully drawn and

marked with latitude and longitude, tropics and equator, and two poles, one at Wagstaff and the other at Pondtail. Shirley Moor had become an ocean, with Idolsfold at the edge like a seaside town.

"What fun we should have," said Martin, "everything to ourselves, no one to interfere with us. We'd farm Idolsfold and run a sort of office in Rushmonden. The rest would be backwoods, and I expect all sorts of wild animals would appear. We should have an exciting time guarding the farm."

"I reckon you'd soon get tired of it," said Dick, "you'd want to go back to London."

"I shouldn't ever. You bet I shouldn't. I hate London. I shan't live there when I grow up, whatever happens. But they'll try to make me."

"Why?"

"Because Father and Mother both want me to go into the firm—Raikes and Laurelwood, you know. They want me to be a lawyer, but I want to be a farmer."

"Well, maybe they won't try to stop you if they see your mind's still set on it when you're grown up."

"Oh, yes, they will. I know they will. I shall probably have to run away. But it would be much nicer if this could happen—I mean the world be blown into little bits and you and me be the only people left alive on one of them."

Dick said nothing; his mind had drifted on from Martin's silly talk into a world where the only people left were himself and Diana. How wonderful *that* would be—to have her to himself, without contrivance or fuss, not only by moonlight, but in sunshine too. Oh, Diana, Diana . . . his heart almost stopped beating as he thought of her. It seemed a thing too wonderful to believe, that she should love him. Yet it was true. She had sought him out, she had let him kiss her. She had kissed him herself. The rose of her mouth had bloomed against his cheek.

"What's the matter?" said Martin. "What are you thinking of?"

"Only of what you said—a world with just two people in it."

There were too many people in the world, even the little world of Idolsfold. He could not help thinking of the people who would cry out in anger and shame if they knew that he loved Diana Laurelwood and that she loved him. Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood would be shocked at his impudence and his own father and mother would not be any better pleased. That he should dare to lift his eyes . . . and

certainly he would not have dared if hers had not looked down so sweetly, so kindly, out of the loose sheaf of her hair. Sometimes his mind went blank, stunned by the thought that she had chosen him—she who might have chosen anybody. Almost every day he had to listen to Emmy's speculations as to her love affairs and the man she would marry some day. What would she say if she knew that man was already chosen and that he was her own brother Dick?

Of course he had not dared speak of marriage. He would not even have dared to think of it if she had not made her wishes plain. But it was she, not he, who had begun the courtship, who had led him in those first steps he would not have dared to take without her invitation. He had felt urged to tell her she was beautiful, but his mind had traveled no further than that. "I've never seen anyone as beautiful as you" fell very far short of: "If you're out tonight, you may see me down by Clearhedge Wood." It was she, not he, who had said that.

And afterward, when he had accepted her invitation, she had repaid his kisses with her own. She had called him loving names, she had twined her fingers into his, and one night she had taken his face between her hands and traced his features with her moving lips, as if she was blind and wanted to learn them by heart.

He knew very well that there were girls who would do these things and mean nothing by it. But those girls were an inferior kind to Diana Laurelwood. At best they were servant girls, at worst they were the girls Joe met at the Crown. Diana Laurelwood would never make love to a man she did not mean to marry. It was an insult to imagine her carrying on like Joe's Beaty or even like Rosie Boorman on her night out. Emmy had said that girls like Diana did not go out with young fellows or let themselves be courted in the ordinary way. They got engaged to be married with, apparently, no preparation in the nature of walking out. They did not work on the common system of trial and error, but made their choices like princesses. A princess had chosen him.

Of course there were difficulties. He could not expect to be received as Diana's suitor by anybody except herself. Sometimes he was troubled by this, feeling that hiding and secrecy were unworthy of her. Besides, a time would come when Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood might want her to marry somebody else, and she would have to tell them that she loved Dick Lardner. Then there would be trouble. Mighty efforts would be made to tear them apart, not only by her parents but by his.

Against that day he must make plans and already he had begun to make them. Planning an open, honorable, future made up to him in a way for the secret meetings he felt dishonored her. Of course they were both very young, only eighteen. Even had their situations been equal there could be no question of marriage for some years yet. By the time they were old enough he was determined to have something worthy of her to offer. He could not ask her to defy her family and break away from the elegant, comfortable life she lived, only to become an ordinary farmer's wife. He just could not picture her in the same situation as his mother and Emmy, and his heart sickened at the thought of her sunk in any degree by marrying him. Every year British farming became more and more of a struggle. But in another country, in another world . . .

Working alone or lying awake at night, he would indulge in his own private version of Martin's dream. A world with just two people in it, himself and Diana. There would be other human beings, of course, but there would be no one to meddle or spoil or blame—no one to think her sunk or inferior. In the unknown world he had heard of on the other side of this, farming was both a prosperous and an honorable career. He would go out there, he would work hard, he would overcome all difficulties, he would make his fortune. He would build her a beautiful house, such as he had seen in pictures, low and white, shaded by great trees. In it there should be rooms as fine and well furnished as any she had left. Servants should wait upon her, and he would be her most devoted humble servant of them all.

He had once been to a lantern lecture on New Zealand, and he remembered much of what the lecturer had said, not only about opportunities but about such things as climate and scenery. There was also one of Martin's stories in which the country had been the solution of a young couple's difficulties. The writer knew his job too well to stress this aspect in a story for boys, but there had been just that amount of useful information. New Zealand was fixed in Dick's mind as a land of beauty and success. To crown all, it was on the edge of that paradise he had dreamed of ever since leaving school—pink coral islands in a blue ocean, palms looking down into crystal lagoons full of fish as many-colored as flowers. The Hovendens had mocked him and stuck pins into him for listening to the teacher so intently, but when he was safe at home he had taken out his atlas and found it all again, that blue sea, dotted with islands, charted into mysterious tropics and printed over with the magic word Oceania;

a coral pink Australia sticking up its horn toward strange shapes called Guinea, Flores and Timor, while New Zealand hung below, furry with mountains, above the white void of the Pole.

His atlas was now Bess's property, but she was willing enough to let him look at it, and once more he studied the colored plan of land and water, brooding over it as if his eyes could pierce its symbols and find hidden in them the mystery of another life. While Martin charted his tiny ball of familiar fields and lanes, the world which would keep him forever in the freedom of Idolsfold, so Dick charted his unknown world of oceans, continents and islands, the world into which he would escape forever from Idolsfold with its barriers and restrictions.

He did not think that his parents would make any objection to his emigrating. His father often said that he was of very little use at home; and anyway he would not, when he died, want to leave the farm to be divided among three brothers. There was no more than enough to keep one of them with his family, so it would be all to the good if Dick was far away, making his own fortune. He saw himself coming back, the rich uncle, bringing presents to his nephews and nieces, his brothers and sisters.

There were uneasy moments when he thought of the practical steps to be taken, of the difficulties to be overcome, of points at which his scheme might break down. Sometimes he would feel that there was not all that difference between his world and Martin's in sheer impossibility. But he loved Diana too much to be long discouraged by any difficulties in the way of attaining her. He would find things working out more plainly as he grew older; and some day, but not yet, he would tell her of his plans and draw new strength from her encouragement. At present he was still too shy and she did not give him many chances. To her, evidently, the passing moment was enough. With tender gratitude he accepted her faith in him.

Then suddenly his world was destroyed. His private world became a mass of spinning fragments. Everything was broken and everything was dead. And no one had done it but Diana herself. No one but Diana could have done it. No one but Diana had the power to destroy all the beauty and meaning of life and leave him nothing but dead nights and days.

At first he had been quite unsuspecting. When she did not meet him as she had promised he had been quite sure that it was her cour-

age and not her love that had failed. Poor child . . . he had felt almost a fatherly pity for her as he waited on the edge of the moonlight. She had been afraid to come out alone after everyone was in bed; he ought not have asked her to do so. He ought to have made some other plan. A lover of her own class would have managed better. He had only marked the difference between their lives by asking her to meet him like this at dead of night. He began to feel ashamed of himself for having frightened her and for having broken the rules of her world.

That was what he wanted to tell her when he tried in vain to meet her all the next day and the next. At first he thought it was only bad luck that made her so hard to find. But after the second day and the second night it really began to look as if she was keeping out of his way. Either the Laurelwoods had found out about them, or she herself did not want to see him any more.

It was hard to believe the first, because in that case his own parents would surely have been told about it, and the family row that they both dreaded would have broken out. But anything was easier to believe than that she had turned against him and was avoiding him of her own free will. He felt unworthy of her because after two or three days the thought would cross his mind. Shame, anxiety and bewilderment made him frantic, and in the end he was chasing her without fear of watchful eyes, without fear of anything but of what was in his heart.

He saw her go into the yard while he was at work with Joe on the cornstacks. Without thinking of his brother, he dropped his armful of straw and rushed into the yard, meeting her at the corner of the oast barn. The sight of her so close after all those days made him feel quite ill; his heart pounded, his head swam and when he spoke he hardly knew what he said. She was wearing a pink cotton frock and a wide straw hat under which her face looked shadowed and remote. There was something in her face, in the look that passed over it when she saw him, that made him feel he had met a stranger. He cried out something—he did not know what he said.

Then clear out of the confusion came her cruel voice. She spoke as if she was angry with him.

"I'm sorry, Dick. But I'd hoped you'd guess that I can't come out with you any more."

She spoke in a high society way, making him feel he had no right even to expect her to meet him. "I really couldn't come out in the middle of the night like that. It wouldn't have been proper."

His mouth was so dry he could hardly speak. He wanted to ask what had happened, why she had changed. All he could do was to argue the rights and wrongs of the midnight meeting.

She swept aside his stammering voice with more of her high society stuff. "Don't you see that we were getting ourselves into an impossible situation? Suppose I'd gone on meeting you, nothing could ever have come of it, not if we met every night till I go away."

Evidently she had not thought of the future. It had not entered her head that he was making plans. Why should it? For a moment his terror grew less as he saw a possible reason for her behavior. He had done wrong in not telling her about his plans, in letting her think, perhaps, that he had none. She might even have taken him for one of those boys who kiss and make love without a thought of marriage. No wonder then that she had taken fright and started to look after herself. He began to explain.

"As soon as Dad 'ull let me I'm going to New Zealand, and I'm going to work there till I've made a place for you—"

She had let him run on for a bit, but suddenly she interrupted him, speaking more sharply than ever.

"I'm not the sort of girl who marries a farmer either here or in the colonies. I'm surprised that you should think for a moment I'd do anything like that."

Then he lost his nerve, and roared out, "Diana, don't you love me? Didn't you ever love me?"

She had looked uneasy for a moment, but there was no relenting when she spoke. She sounded impatient, "Oh, I don't know," then hard, "not now anyway," then cruel, "No, no, never."

He stood still, unable to move; silent, unable to speak. The world seemed to topple slowly round him, the barn roofs in the sunshine, the blue sky behind them, Diana herself—all crumbling, smashing, and yet remaining where they were. He felt giddy, as if he was going to fall, but he too remained standing like everything else.

Then Diana began to say things in a different voice, but they were the same dreadful things. "Don't take it so seriously . . . people can't help doing these things . . . but they can't go on forever . . . it really wouldn't do . . . you'll soon see that for yourself."

Her eyes under her shady hat looked like empty pools.

She had gone, though he could not remember her going, and his brother Joe stood there where she had been.



"Well," said Joe, "what's up?"

Dick could not answer. He was trembling.

"What made you dash off like that all of a sudden?"

Still Dick said nothing.

"Come along," said Joe.

He took him by the elbow, and guided him back to the corn-stack like a blind man. Then he pulled up a bundle of straw and Dick sat down on it and was sick.

"We-e-ell," said Joe again.

They were alone on the stack, hidden from the house by many roofs and walls. Dick sat there trembling and after a while Joe thumped him on the shoulder.

"Tell me all about it, kid."

"I-I can't."

"Then take my handkerchief and mop yourself up."

He handed Dick his big red and white handkerchief, and stood there towering over him while he wiped his face.

"Now tell me what's the matter. No? Well, I'll tell you then. You've been mooning after Miss Diana and she's got shut of you."

"I wasn't mooning."

"Well, call it what you like. But you wasn't courting her seriously."

"I was."

Joe drew back and looked at him. His brown, good-humored face with its fringe of damp hair twisted for a moment as if he was going to laugh. But he whistled instead.

"Whew! . . . You!"

Dick covered his eyes, which had filled with tears.

"Well, don't you let Dad or Mum know, that's all, or there'll be a fine terrification. Lord, Lord, what a boy! Courting Miss Diana Laurelwood. Did you ever hear the like? No wonder she grumbled at you."

"You-you heard what she said?"

"Not much, but I could tell by her voice that she was properly vexed. And no wonder. She ain't the sort of young lady to put up with suchlike as you. What made you start?"

Anger was beginning to work in Dick.

"I didn't start," he said. "She did."

"Oh."

"Yes. Do you think I'd have dared think of her in that way if she

hadn't shown me what she wanted? Smiling and talking and asking me to come out and meet her after supper . . ."

Again Joe whistled.

"She did all that?"

"All that—all that—all that," repeated Dick over and over again, because he did not want to add, "and more."

"Well, I reckon she was just having her fun like any other girl."

"That was it," his anger shaking in his voice, "she was just having her fun. But I didn't understand."

Joe took a straw and began to split it carefully.

"You reckoned she was serious too?"

"Aye."

"And what would you have done about it all? I mean later on. How could you have married her?"

"I'd gotten it all planned out. I was going out to New Zealand to make a home for her, a good home, as good as anything she has now. I wasn't going to ask her to marry a poor farmer."

Joe began to whistle again, but was overpowered. Deep rumbling laughter shook him as he stooped forward, holding his sides. But his words did not laugh when they came.

"You poor kid. You poor ignorant kid."

"Why? Ignorant? I bet I know a heap more about New Zealand than you do."

"Aye, maybe—if it's about the flowers that grow there and the wild beasts and the look of the place. But when it comes to earning your living either here or across the world I reckon you know no more than a day-old calf. Make a home for her? A good home? You'd starve both yourselves in a year."

"New Zealand isn't like these parts. It's full of opportunities."

"Not for chaps like you." Again he rumbled. "I'm sorry, boy; but if there's one thing funnier than Miss Diana Laurelwood going out to New Zealand to marry Dick Lardner it's Dick Lardner making his fortune there or anywhere else. Why, you don't even know how to do an ordinary day's work. You learn your proper job here before you think of marrying anybody, and then it 'ud better be a girl with sense, who'll know how to carry on when you get full of fancies."

Dick said nothing. He was too miserable to feel offended by Joe's words. Besides, what did it matter if he could not earn his living? It might interest Joe but it had nothing to do with his present wretchedness. Diana had not got shut of him because he could never make a home for her, but because she had never taken him seriously.

She had never loved him at all. She had just been carrying on, having her fun, as Joe had said, like any other girl, like Rosie Boorman, like any little village slut, like those girls at the Crown, except that she had been brought up respectable. There walked his princess, in the mud; there, in rags, went his fragile, fastidious lady.

"The trouble about you," said Joe, "is that you've always been a Johnny-head-in-air. You should ought to look where you're going. You're a man now, I reckon, turned eighteen and past all that moonshiny sort of stuff about girls. Girls are well enough if you treat 'em ordinary, but if you go mooning after 'em and looking up to 'em, they'll despise you for it. It's time you knew some girls of your own sort, not the sort that you think's above you. You come out with me some night."

"Your girls aren't my sort."

"But they are, if only you'd come out of the clouds and look at 'em. They're every man's sort. Not to marry—I don't say that. But when can you and I think of marrying, with corn at the price it is and the bottom out of all the markets? What you want is a nice, kind, bodily sort of girl who'll make you forget all this nonsense. You make up your mind that till it's time to get married, and that won't be for a'dunnomany years yet, girls are only there for fun."

Dick said nothing and Joe went on.

"It's these Laurelwoods, of course. They've put all sorts of notions into your head, and not yours only—Dad's and Mum's and Clarence's and Emmy's, and maybe Bess's too. I've stood clear of 'em since I left school. If you ask me, we've had a bit too much of that family. There they are on the ledge above us, and we've got to crick our necks and look up to them; and they look down and smile and say how nice we are. I'm against all that. We Lardners ain't so low that nobody need look down on us, and I don't take no interest in toffs. A farmer's good enough for me—I'd sooner be a farmer than a lawyer any day. But having them here like this gets all your ideas upside down. Whenever I take over this place they don't come back here no more. I stand on my own feet and keep my head straight on my shoulders. And now for the Lord's sake let's get going on with this stack, or Dad 'ull come out and wonder why we haven't covered no more than a yard of it."

After that the days went by as usual—up at half-past five, work till half-past seven, breakfast then and work till twelve. More work after dinner, and after tea now that the days were long. The corn-

stacks were thatched, so that Dad need not worry about the threshers coming late, and the hops had been sprayed for the last time before picking. Nearly a week had passed and the days were the same.

Only the nights were different, when he woke suddenly with a terrible sense of loss, and saw the moon looking in at the window like a mocking face—the moon that had changed his life with its changing hours. He knew then, as he had not time to know by day, how much he had lost besides Diana. Beautiful things like the moon were dead or changed to cruelty. He would huddle under the clothes and shed tears that seemed to have no meaning or comfort in them, and then fall into a sleep where dreams hunted him like dogs, driving him through briars and bushes and terrible places where he was always frightened and alone.

His only comfort was that he never saw Diana, either by day or by night. She had, for some reason, no place in his dreams, and by day he shunned her as she shunned him, so that there was little chance of their meeting. The only danger had been removed by Joe, who had undertaken to drive the trap should it ever be required to take out the family. Dick knew that they were going to Folkestone that week, and he had dreaded having to drive them to the station and perhaps hand Diana out—though last time he had driven her, he remembered, she had escaped his hand and rushed into the house with her skirts bundled round her. No doubt she was already beginning to put him in his place, but he had been too stupid to see it.

That had been the day after her failure to meet him, the day of her going to the grand party at Morghew Hall. Emmy and Mother and Granny were talking about it that evening nearly a week later. When Dick came in to tea and sat down at the table they were already talking hard.

"It would be just about wunnerful," said Granny, "if she was to settle here."

"Well, it looks like it, don't it?" said Emmy.

"A good match for her," said Mother. "Morghew's a fine place and the Mallenders have a lot of money."

"And he'll be lucky too," said Granny. "He'll never find a prettier girl nor a sweeter."

"Who's that you're talking about?" asked Dad, who had just come in.

"Miss Diana and Mr. Humphrey Mallender," said Mother. "Emmy's just heard that it's to be a match."

Joe made a grimace at Dick across the table. It said: Sit quiet and hold your tongue. But he need not have been afraid. Dick had learned during the last five days to hide the bitterness of death under the common straw of everything except sleep. Now he sat eating and listening, to all observers as quiet and pleased as old Mr. Morris, except that in order to be able to swallow he had to drink his tea with his mouth full.

"I haven't heard nothing for certain," said Emmy, "but Jane Crouch, who was helping with the ices, said they came up together and then went and sat under a tree where they thought nobody could see them. But she could see all right, and she saw him stoop down, and either he whispered in her ear or he kissed her, she couldn't be sure which. And anyways they sat there a long time talking together away from everyone else."

"Miss Diana 'ud never allow a man to kiss her she wasn't engaged to," said Mother.

"No, of course not. But Jane couldn't be sure if it was a kiss or a whisper."

From his prison of silence Dick could hear Joe come plunging into the conversation.

"Well, I can tell you something about that party too."

"You!" cried Emmy. "What can *you* tell us?"

"Oh, I sometimes hear things, and this came from Jass Hovenden. He was saying that everyone stood around in a ring watching the bee-ootiful Mrs. Brown flirting with Mr. Laurelwood."

If he had meant to change the subject he had succeeded. Both Emmy and Mother cried out at once.

"*Our* Mr. Laurelwood?"

"Yes—yours. Her's, rather—Mrs. Laurelwood's. Jass says she wasn't above half pleased."

Mother turned red at his impudence.

"How dare you talk such rubbish? And what can Jass Hovenden know about it all? He wasn't there."

"No, but Bob Hovenden was, seeing after the carriages; and he says they stood there laughing and talking together like a couple of magpies for full three quarters of an hour. Not another mortal joined them, not even Mrs. Laurelwood, though she was close by with Mr. and Mrs. Colenutt."

"I'll never believe," said Mother, "that he talked to her for any reason but politeness. He's the sort of gentleman who'd be polite to anyone."

"Well, all I can say is it took him a long time."

Mother was getting really angry.

"There ain't no bounds to what fellows like Jass and Bob will say, and you shouldn't ought to repeat it, Joe—not in this house."

"Why not? I don't know as I'm saying so much against Mr. Laurelwood if I say he knows a pretty woman when he sees one."

Mother began again, "There ain't no bounds—" but broke off as Granny Lardner suddenly lifted up her voice.

"What's he saying? What's Joe saying about Master Harry?"

Her face was pink and puckered, and a frightened look had come into her blue eyes.

"It's all right, Mother," soothed Mrs. Lardner. "He's only joking," and Emmy comforted: "He was only telling us that Mr. Laurelwood was so polite to everybody at the garden party."

"That was where Miss Diana went—to the garden party?"

"Yes. They were all there."

"And she's engaged to marry Mr. Humphrey Mallender."

"Well, we don't know for certain yet. But he kissed her, and we were all saying that Miss Diana would never allow a man to kiss her she wasn't engaged to."

Somebody choked, but it was not Dick—only old Mr. Morris, having trouble with his teeth.

When tea was over Dick followed Joe into the yard.

"Are you going to the Crown tonight?"

"Meaning you'll come with me?"

"Aye."

"That's a boy!" and Joe grinned all over his face.

"Well, I thought maybe it 'ud do me good to get among folks."

"And meet a nice girl who'd never kiss a man she wasn't engaged to . . . I'm sorry, lad, but Mother and Emmy do make me laugh."

Dick was glad to think that he was pleasing Joe. His broken spirit found comfort in Joe's kindness. Hitherto he had been more Clarence's brother than Joe's, but now he felt that he would climb up the years toward his elder brother rather than down them to the younger. And that way he would escape from Martin too. If he went with Joe he would get shut of all the Laurelwoods.

At nightfall they left the house together.

"Now Joe," said Mother, "don't you take Dick to the Crown."

"Not I," said Joe. "We're going to the Dripping Well."

The Dripping Well was in Copstreet, and Dick had been there

once or twice before, and enjoyed a pint of ale in the clean, pleasant bar, where the company was clean and pleasant too.

"Better go there first," said Joe with a wink, "just to say we've been where Mum thinks we are."

It was a fine, clear evening, with a sunset like a bonfire over Sussex in the west. The crimson light hung in the overflow of the Old Watering, and as they crossed the marsh the first stars appeared, in the sky and in the mirror of the floods. Dick swung his arms and tried to walk like Joe, because he wanted to feel like Joe. He wanted to feel joking and careless about girls. He did not love Diana any more—she had made that impossible—but she still hurt him almost unbearably. He could not face the coming night with the thought of her possibly living only three miles away for the rest of their lives.

So he must do what she had done. She had found another man, so he must find another girl. He did not want to go with the common sluts who hung about the Crown, or even to speak to them. But at least they were honest girls whose behavior matched their state of life. Besides, who else was there for him? Who else was there for him to match against this man whom she had chosen? He could not start another serious courtship, even if he knew of a girl likely to take him on. No, he would do like Diana—except that with him the fun would come after the real thing instead of before it.

"Cold?" asked Joe.

"Oh, middling."

"We'll soon find something to warm you."

But the ale at the Dripping Well did not warm him much—perhaps because Bob and Tom and Jass Hovenden were all there drinking it too. No one else had come in except old Fred Sheet, the teamster at Plurenden, and he never spoke a word to anybody. Joe laughed and joked as he always did and there was talk of farming and cricket; but Dick could not feel at ease. It was not only the past that distressed him now, he began to feel troubled by the thought of what lay ahead. Perhaps it was being with the Hovendens, for he found himself thinking of Nellie Hovenden and the thing she had whispered to him in the school playground all those years ago. He felt suddenly young and frightened, a little boy. He knew that he was a man, older, not younger, than many who did these things. But he could not feel a man; he could only feel a boy,

as small and as shocked and as scared as the little boy in the playground. The beer did not make him feel any older, though he drank two pints.

Joe paid for it, of course. Dick had scarcely any money in his pocket, for Dad would not give him more than half a crown a week—said that was all he was worth. But Joe would not have worked at all if he had not been given proper wages.

“Drink up,” said his brother, “we must be off.”

“Going home?” asked the landlord, “it’s early.”

Joe grinned at the Hovendens.

“We’re good boys.”

They went out into the village street that smelled of earth and night. The glow on the edge of the sky had gone, but above them the great darkness was ashake with stars. Joe stopped to light his pipe, and Dick said: “Maybe I should ought to go home after all.”

“What’s that?”

“Maybe I should ought to get back now. I’ll tell Mother you’re at the Well.”

Joe stood over him, his broad shoulders blocked against a swing of stars.

“Now don’t you get fainthearted. There’s comfort for you if you’ll only go ahead, but if you go back you’ll only start moping again. It’s time that you took hold of yourself and I’m helping you.”

“It’s uncommon kind of you, Joe.”

“I don’t want thanks. I’d sooner have you sensible. Come on.”

Dick went on. After all, what did it matter? It seemed silly to feel disgust when he could not feel joy. Perhaps if he went through with this he would feel nothing at all.

The Crown stood at the throws where the road that runs through Rushmonden and Copstreet to Dym Church meets the Wealden road from Shadoxhurst. It was nearly a mile from the village and some thought it odd to have a pub so far from the nearest house, but in the old days, people said, it had been a smugglers’ inn. People also said that it was still something of the kind, and that spirits that had never paid duty found their way to it from the sea and the marsh very much as they had done a hundred years ago.

At first the bar did not look so very different from the bar of the Dripping Well. It had the same advertisements on the walls, the same sawdust on the floor. But it was not so clean and there were



women sitting in it. Women scarcely ever came to the Dripping Well, except to the Bottle and Jug entrance. If they did, it was always to the saloon bar, where Mrs. Cocks would serve them with port wine or gin and hot water. But here were women, some of them only girls, drinking ale at the counter and laughing and talking with the men.

Dick recognized Beaty Fuggle, whom he knew by sight, though he had never spoken to her. As he looked at her freckled face, untidy hair and unclean dress he wondered what Joe and the other men could see in her. None of the girls looked even pretty, to his notions. Yet these were the girls that the boys ran after, that brought trade to the Crown every night, in spite of the landlord's ale.

As he drank that ale Dick felt himself growing even colder than at the Dripping Well, and he almost shivered when Joe brought round Beaty.

"Pleased to meet you," she said and gave him her hot, dry hand. "Is this the boy you was telling me about?" she asked Joe.

"Aye. Is Queenie here?"

"Sure to be, if she hasn't gone up already. Oh, there she is. Come here, Queen."

A girl came forward, shorter and stouter than Beaty, and more smartly dressed. Her hair was a bright, unnatural yellow, but her skin was so dark that Dick remembered having heard that the Fuggles were half diddicoys.

"This is my sister, Mrs. Bond—Mr. Dick Lardner."

"Pleased to meet you."

Another decorous handshake, and a pause while Joe ordered four more ales. Then they carried their mugs to a table and sat down.

"Never been here before, have you?" said Queenie.

"No never."

"But now he's come he'll come regular," said Joe with his jolly wink.

"Many happy returns," and Beaty raised her mug. They all drank, and again Dick wished the ale were not so cold. He must have shivered this time, for Queenie said, "That's a goose walked over your grave."

Joe and Beaty began to joke each other and laugh a great deal, but Dick found it very hard to give more than short answers to Queenie's questions. She had pushed herself close to him, her stout thigh was against his and her breath was on his face as she talked.

From her rose an overpowering smell of scent and sweat. He would have edged away, but he was at the end of the bench and could go no farther.

"I like you," said Queenie. "I've taken quite a fancy to you. Do you like me?"

"I'm sure you're very nice."

"Do you like my hair?"

"It's very pretty."

"I've been told it's the color of corn."

Dick opened his mouth, but said nothing, staring at the dark roots of the corn. She put her hand in his lap and again he shuddered.

"Your grave must be in a farmyard. Cold?"

"A little."

"Never mind. I know how to make you warm. Tell me—" She leaned close to him, but before she could whisper the landlord shouted: "Time, gentlemen! Time!"

There was a general scraping back of chairs and for an instant Dick felt released—until he remembered that for him tonight "Time" was no signal for going home. He sidled close to Joe while his brother swallowed the last of his ale, drawing a certain strength from his virility. He longed to say: "Joe, don't leave me," but had not the power. Queenie pulled his sleeve. "Come on, dearie, he's closing the bar."

"Joe . . ."

"What's that? Oh, all right, boy. Here you are."

He pushed two half crowns into his hand.

"That's for Queenie. If she wants more, she's only trying it on because you're green. Tell her I said that was right."

"Joe . . ." but his voice was lost in the noise and talk as they all moved out. Joe was now several heads and shoulders away. Only Queenie was near, holding him tightly by the arm, leaning against him as if she could not walk.

Everyone went out, but not everyone went home. A little group of men and girls went back into the house by a side door. Dick found himself in a passage, still clutched by Queenie. Ahead of him a steep flight of stairs soared into complete darkness.

"Come along, lovey, watch your step," for he had stumbled.

"Where's Joe?"

"He's all right. Don't you worry about Joe."

She still seemed to be leaning against him, yet he knew that in

reality she was guiding him upstairs. Up they went into the darkness; her fingers groped, and he pushed her away.

"Don't touch me."

"Come, dearie. You mustn't be angry with poor Queen. She's a good, kind girl, who only wants to make you happy."

A door was open now and he saw a window filled with stars. Automatically he moved toward it out of the dark, and Queenie clutched his arm again. "Be careful. There's a step here." As soon as they were inside she let go of him to lock the door, and he shook himself like a dog that has been in dirty water.

"Nice room, isn't it?" said Queenie, calling it out of the dark with a candle. "I don't live here, you know. I live over at Gillingham. But I come here a lot."

Dick sat down on the bed, because there seemed to be clothes on all the chairs.

"That's right, make yourself at home." She sat down beside him and put her arms round his neck. "I like you, darling. Soon we'll be nice and snug. I'm glad I came here tonight."

Panic, deadly panic, was grinding in Dick's bowels. He tried to speak, but his tongue was like a billet of wood. He tried to move, but his strength was as water flowing away.

"I always wanted to meet you," continued Queen, "ever since Joe told me about you."

The billet of wood rattled and made sounds.

"Joe told you—what?"

"He told me two things, ducky. That you'd never been with a girl and that some grand quality duchess had jilted you. Then, said I, bring him to me, for I'm a cure for both. I can make him happy as he's never been before and I ain't likely to remind him of a duchess while I'm doing it."

She laughed, and her laugh which had no darkness or lewdness in it, gave him courage.

"Oh, Queen, please listen to me. Joe's wrong—I don't want . . . it isn't that. I must go now."

"Go! You can't go. Don't be so silly."

"But I must go. I should never ought to have come."

"Oh, yes you should. And anyways you're here now; so you must stay. And I'll tell you why you must stay—because I like you. You're a lovely boy, handsomest I've seen for months, and I'll be all upset if you go away. It'll break my heart. I do believe I've fallen in love with you. Come, give me a kiss."

Suddenly she threw herself back on the bed, dragging him with her, and at the same time her mouth fastened on his like a trap. Panic ceased to be merely a dark undertow and became a fountain, spraying through all his senses. He twisted, screamed, and was standing on the floor.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm going."

"Don't be a fool." Then as she saw his shaking hand on the key, she jumped off the bed. "You can't walk out on me like that."

She snatched the key and twisted it out of the lock.

"If you think I don't expect my money because you're a sissy you've made a big mistake."

His relief was so great that he almost laughed. He dived into his pockets and pulled out Joe's half crowns with some loose change of his own.

"Here you are. Now you give me back the key."

"Let's see what it is, first."

He held out the coins on the palm of his hand and she counted them before putting back the key into the lock.

"You're the silliest boy I've ever met," she said, but her good humor had returned after its brief absence. She smiled and smoothed her brassy hair.

"I—I'm sorry," he said awkwardly.

"Don't mention it."

He grabbed at the door, as if he feared it would not open, and the next minute was fumbling his way downstairs.

It was very dark, and he could not see where he was going, even if he had remembered the way out, which he had not. At the bottom he groped for the door but it was some time before his fingers came upon a latch. He lifted it and a light shone, but it was not the light of the moon. He had come into the bar, behind the counter, where the landlord sat with a candle and a glass.

"Hullo!"

He swung round and stared at Dick. He was an oldish man, but his hair was thick and dark and a black stubble covered nearly all the lower half of his face. Dick had never spoken to him before, and would have liked to escape without speaking to him now, but he had no idea of the way out except through the bar.

"I—I'm sorry. I'm looking for the way out."

"Wasser matter?"

Dick realized then that his whole body was jerking and shaking. He felt sick and probably looked green.

"You'd better siddown."

There was a second stool beside the landlord's and at the sight of it Dick's legs seemed to give way and refuse to support him any longer. He suddenly found himself sitting down, leaning over the bar with his head on his arms.

"Here—you'd better take something."

A glass was pushed toward him and he drank. He had no idea what he was drinking, but it was more comforting than the ale. He felt better at once—his heart stopped thudding and his head began to clear.

"What's happened?" asked the landlord. "What's upset you? Who were you with upstairs?"

"Mrs. Bond."

"She behave herself all right? If she didn't, tell me, and I'll chuck her out."

"Oh, yes. It wasn't her fault. Only I—I—didn't really want—I—"

He broke off, as the landlord swung round on his stool and faced him.

"You're Joe Lardner's young brother, ain't you?"

Dick nodded.

"I heard he'd brought his brother here tonight, but I never thought it was a boy so unlike himself."

"I'm younger."

"And different. He shouldn't ought to have let you go with Queenie—Madge 'ud have suited you better. She was in service once—in a good house, too."

"I didn't really want to go with anyone," the drink, whatever it was, had limbered up his tongue "but I thought . . . hoped it 'ud help me forget some trouble I was in."

The landlord shook his head.

"Don't you believe it. Girls don't help you forget trouble—they make it. If there's anything you want to forget, this is the stuff."

He reached for a bottle and filled up Dick's glass again.

"I'm sorry I can't pay for it. I've spent all my money."

"Don't you worry about that. Between you and me and the bed-post, this particular bottle don't cost me nothing. You drink up and feel better."

Dick drank and felt better. He felt so good, in fact, that the horrors of the night seemed to recede and become no more than a

faintly ridiculous background to his well-being. He had never in his life drunk anything stronger than ale, and was surprised and delighted to find his body growing warm and his mind easy.

"What is this?"

"This?" The landlord grinned. "This is some French stuff called Armagnac, and if your brother had given you a glass or two of something like this before he brought on Queenie, you wouldn't be down here now. But Joe Lardner never drinks nothing stronger than ale, and how he does what he does on ale is past my reckoning."

The bar, dark except for the solitary candle, and rancid with the stale smell of drink, seemed wonderfully warm and cosy. Dick was sitting close to the landlord, their elbows were on the counter, their glasses were in front of them, the bottle stood between them. Something was singing in his head that had not sung since Diana turned him down.

"I feel better now," he said.

"Betcher do. You've taken the right stuff. I'm not asking you no questions about your trouble, but I've never yet heard of a trouble this sort of thing couldn't cure. Girls!" He spat dexterously into the spittoon under Dick's stool. "They're no use at all to me. I let 'em come here, because it amuses the young chaps and makes 'em come here too and spend money, saves me a lot of trouble one way and another. But, as for myself, I never look at 'em. I just fills glasses and takes money all the evening—like a machine, you might say. Then when everyone's gone home or gone happy, I sits here by myself and feels better than them all."

"May I ask," said Dick, feeling rather proud of his formal phrasing, "May I ask if you are a married man?"

"Surely, I was once, but thank heaven I ain't now."

"Then you think women are no part of the beauty of life."

The landlord laughed and Dick laughed too.

"I've never yet noted much beauty in life," said the landlord, "save in here"—and he whacked the bottle rather harder than perhaps he meant to, so that it rocked and they both made a grab to stop it falling. Dick missed his grab, which made him laugh again, but the landlord seized it and filled up their glasses.

"Perhaps I shouldn't ought to have any more," said Dick. "It's not the sort of stuff I'm used to."

"All the better for you, then," said the landlord. "You'll booze up quicker."

"But I don't want to booze up."

"Oh, yes, you do. You said you've had trouble and that's the only way to get over it. You get properly tanked up and you won't worry no more about girls. I guess your trouble was a girl, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't only a girl," said Dick, choosing each word carefully between sips. "It wasn't only herself I mourn for but what she took from me."

"Robbed you, did she? Where did you meet her?"

"Yes, she robbed me. She robbed me of my dreams."

The landlord roared.

"You're a queer one. Never seen the like of you before. Dreams—hark to that!"

"Beautiful dreams," repeated Dick, raising his glass solemnly as if to drink a toast, "beautiful girls, beautiful flowers, beautiful stars, beautiful moon, beautiful poetry, beautiful pictures."

"And she robbed you of all that?" the landlord was still shaking. "My! what a dirty thief!"

"All that—beautiful dreams, beautiful girls, beautiful flowsh, beautiful starsh—moon—but I've got it back now—all back."

He belched and held out his glass.

He had no idea how the night ended or the day began. It was already well forward when he opened his eyes on a hostile world. Everything was hostile, most of all his own body. Retching, aching, burning, it had become his worst enemy. He lay in an agony of sickness and headache on a bed which seemed made of hot stones. The sunshine harshly scoured the room, tormenting his closed eyes with a light that rubbed and stung. A fly buzzed over him, settled on him, buzzed over him again.

Then his mother came in and joined his enemies.

"Oh, you wicked boy," she groaned, directly she saw he was awake.

"Mother, I feel terrible ordinary."

He had only a vague idea now of the past night. Its memories came piecemeal and he had a curious giddy feeling that they were moving backward . . . himself clinging to Joe's arm, vomiting on the stairs, swimming through the darkness between black hedges, under huge stars, sitting over a candle stuck in a bottle—no, the candle was in a candlestick, there was brandy in the bottle . . . the smell of brandy . . . the smell of scent, of sweat, of a sweating girl who had whispered something. Ugh! . . .

"Wait—wait—here's the basin."

She got it to him just in time.

"Mother, Mother, I feel terrible ordinary."

She was sorry for him now, and held his forehead. Then she brought a towel dipped in water and wiped his face.

"You silly boy," she said, "you naughty boy," but not angrily.

He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes."

"You stay there quiet for a bit. Then later on I'll bring you up some breakfast."

He shuddered.

"I don't want any."

"You will later. I'll come back and see."

He caught her hand as she tucked in the sheet.

"Mother, I'm sorry."

"And well you may be, drinking brandy, and at your age. I'm shocked."

But she kissed him all the same.

He sank into a kind of doze, from which in time sickness wakened him, and thus the morning passed. At twelve o'clock Joe came in. He knew it was Joe creaking over the floor, though he kept his eyes tight shut.

"Well, you silly kid, how are you?"

"Terrible ordinary. Let me be."

But Joe sat down beside him.

"You've got me into a fine terrification, I'd have you know. Why couldn't you come in quiet?"

"I don't remember nothing."

"Maybe you don't, but you made such a noise you woke up Mum and Dad, and of course I had all the blame. I couldn't tell them what had really happened and that it wasn't my fault. Why didn't you stay with Queenie?"

"Don't speak to me."

"It's all very well, but if you'd stopped with her you'd be feeling valiant now instead of like old rubbish. Of course Cakebread was a fool to give you brandy, but it was your own fault, going back into the bar."

"I was trying to find my way out."

"Silly kid. Howsomever . . ." He had lost his anger and become the old easy-going brother Joe. "One mercy is the Laurelwoods



don't know about it. Mum was creating something terrible till she made sure they hadn't heard nothing last night. And today they've all gone off to Folkestone, so you're your own master and can be as sick as you like without fear of disturbing them. Had your breakfast?"

"No. Mother tried to make me, but I couldn't."

"If you take my advice you'll have a glass of ale."

"No, thank you."

"But it'll do you good, quiet your stomach and liven you up into the bargain. Ale's better for you than all those tea-slops and we've got some bottles in the house. I'll bring you up one now."

"I'd sooner have plain water."

"You try it."

He went out and fetched a bottle of beer. Dick felt very reluctant to drink it, but Joe was right, it did him good. His stomach felt calmer and his head lighter and clearer.

"Valiant stuff," said his brother. "If you'd stuck to beer last night you'd be all right now."

"It was so cold."

"It's a cold heart can't warm its own ale. That's your trouble, boy. You're too cold and fanciful when it comes to girls. You should have stopped along of Queenie."

"Don't speak of her."

"All right. And don't you speak of her, neither—to Mum or Dad, I mean."

"I'd never think of mentioning anything so horrible to anyone."

"Horrible—poor Queen? That's a way to talk. I tell you one thing, nothing's so horrible as brandy, and preferring brandy to a girl is horrible, to my mind. Howsomever, you're young—maybe too young, and maybe I shouldn't ought to have taken you out; but I wanted to help you and put you right after what you'd been through with that Laurelwood girl."

"I know, Joe, you meant to do well by me. But I—I'll never be any good at that sort of thing. I feel too scared."

"Scared!" Joe rocked with laughter. "Scared! What of?"

"I dunno, but something scared me."

Joe shook his head.

"I can't make you out. You need waking up and shaking up, if ever a man did. Yet when I try to do it, look what happens. Howsomever, I shan't say no more about it now. Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I thought you would after that ale. It's grand stuff. How anybody can prefer spirits has me beat."

It was several days before his family would treat him ordinarily. His father wouldn't speak to him except when obliged to by their common work, and when his mother spoke the tears came into her eyes. Granny Lardner sighed and shook her head every time she saw him and Clarence giggled.

The only two who showed no difference were Joe and Bess. Joe was his old easy-going, good-natured self, still a bit amazed at his brother's weakness, but without contempt or blame. Bess, he knew, took no interest in his shortcomings. Her mind was full of her own affairs; and it happened just then that she too was in trouble. Indeed her disgrace was in one way blacker than his, for, unlike him, she had sinned against the Laurelwoods. There had been some sort of a quarrel between her and Meg, and Mrs. Laurelwood had refused to take her with them that year when the family went for their treat to Folkestone. Mother and Emmy and Granny sighed and shook their heads over her just as they did over Dick. In fact sometimes it was hard to tell whether Mrs. Lardner was more ashamed of her son or of her daughter.

Poor little Bess! He had always been fond of her, because she was the youngest. She alone in the family had never criticized him or made fun of his queer, soft ways. She had been grateful to him for playing with her and making things for her. Even now she still looked up to him. He was her big brother and she was flattered by his notice. The last of his self-respect was in her keeping.

A week passed, and it seemed to him that Diana no longer took trouble to avoid him. She certainly did not deliberately seek his company, but neither did she deliberately shun it, with the result that the dodging had all to be done by him and there were occasional meetings. They had never spoken, but once when she met him she had smiled. She seemed happy and lighthearted; sometimes he could hear her singing about the place, and he wondered ruefully what her heart was made of.

Emmy and his mother and grandmother still talked about her supposed affair with young Mr. Mallender, but he gathered that they had by now grown a little doubtful.

"She hasn't been near the place since," said Mother, "not even to tennis."

"And he's never come here," said Emmy with a sigh.

"I wonder why they're keeping it dark."

"Maybe," said Granny, "he's asked her and she's said 'No.'"

"But she's never seen him, to say yes or no, not since the day of the party."

"They may have met somewhere else."

Thus they talked, not knowing how they hurt him. Only Joe knew and Joe no longer took him seriously as a lover. A boy who could not make himself happy with a girl like Queenie knew nothing of such things and could only have imagined himself in love with Diana. So Joe sat and grinned while the women talked.

Their talk hurt him, but not as much as before, for the pain was dull now, a pain of loss rather than of longing. He did not want Diana any more. He saw now that the whole thing had been impossible. He could never have married her, and she had known it and had only been amusing herself. Yet he could not bear the thought of another man kissing her, or smelling her sweet hair as it hung over his face. He felt relieved when the women seemed inclined to give up their hopes of Humphrey Mallender.

The Laurelwoods were now soon to go back to London. September had come, with a thickening of the sunshine and a sweet, drowsy scent of burning weeds. From the pear tree in front of the house fell the sharp notes of the robin's song, and from the orchard behind it rose a thin sweetness of apples. All these things meant that the summer visit was ending; a few weeks earlier Dick had dreaded them, seeing them as the shadows cast by a farewell that would tear his heart. Now instead they were messengers of hope, shadows cast by sunrise rather than by sunset. When Diana was gone—right out of sight, out of reach, in London, no longer to be met outside the barn door or at the corner of the yard—then he might no longer feel so young and frail.

That was the matter with him now, he guessed. For the last two years he had been growing into manhood, and he had suddenly become a man, holding a golden woman in his arms under a golden moon. But she had made a boy of him again—a little, helpless, silly, naughty boy, who couldn't work, who couldn't drink, who couldn't love. Perhaps when she was gone he might have another chance of growing up.

This year there was a change in the Laurelwoods' last week. It did not run its familiar course of farewell visits, farewell picnics, farewell expeditions in the wagonette. The old aunt at Folkestone, whom they went to see every year, had apparently been ailing this summer, and before they left Idolsfold she died.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Laurelwood had been supposed to feel any

great affection for her, but now she was dead Mrs. Laurelwood cried a great deal, and there was a terrible business getting the family into black—sending to London for the mourning they had worn when King Edward died and buying new things in Folkestone.

Only Diana went with her parents to the funeral. Dick was unable to avoid seeing her start off, though Joe still loyally drove the wagonette. She came out of the house looking like a duchess in her black dress and big black hat with a sweeping feather. The black made her hair look more golden than ever. It shone in the sun as it had shone in the moonlight a month ago.

No one else was about; her mother was still in the house and Joe had gone to find a strap to mend a piece of harness. The horses stood quietly between the shafts, and Diana stood at the little gate, pulling on her long black gloves. Dick stood against the wall, by the bed he had been raking, meaning to slip away but somehow forced to stand and watch her. He had not expected her to come out before Joe was ready.

She stood, smoothing her gloves over her arms, then suddenly she gave a little skip, a little dance that seemed to mock the funeral and her long black dress. She kicked up her high heels, and a frilly white petticoat showed itself and swung. Then she realized what she was doing, and became sedate. She looked round to see if anyone could have seen her, and caught sight of Dick. Their eyes met, and he backed away. Then suddenly she smiled, and said, "Hullo, Dick." But he was gone.

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## INTERLUDE

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"HE WOULDN'T LIKE IT," SAID BESS. "HE WOULDN'T WANT TO GO AWAY. He's happy here with us."

She bitterly disliked the conversation and could not understand how she had become caged in it, nor how Mrs. Cayless had found out about Dick.

"But if going away meant his cure," said Meg, "wouldn't it be worth it?"

Bess still fluttered against the bars.

"Of course if we knew for certain . . . but those things don't always work. I had a friend answered one of those advertisements for powders"—no need to tell her that the friend was herself—"the kind you put in their tea and they never know it. But it wasn't any use."

"Oh, don't think I'm talking about quack remedies. I know a first-rate psychiatrist who runs a small clinic near Bristol. His fees are very moderate, and I feel sure he could help your brother if he had him there, say, for six months. These things are nearly always mental in origin. When did it start?"

Bess flushed with her effort to evade the question, but was powerless to do so.

"Oh, a long time ago, when he was quite a young chap."

"And I suppose the bouts have got more and more frequent."

Bess nodded miserably.

"What sort of intervals does he have now?"

"I couldn't say—it depends."

"That's just it. Every time anything upsets him or he feels ill he makes his escape. And I suppose you can't possibly stop him getting supplies? I mean—I take it for granted that he doesn't depend on the local pubs."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't go to them now. When he's like that he'll go right off the place. Sometimes we can only guess where he is."

"And you can't keep him without money, as he partly owns the farm."

"We do our best for him."

"I'm sure you do. But I'm afraid it can't amount to much in the state he's in now. That's my point. He really ought to have treatment. It's like certain physical conditions, you know, nothing will cure but operation, having the thing dug out."

Bess winced, and Meg added: "Well, think it over, won't you?"

"Yes, thank you, I will," seeing the cage door open.

"I'll give you the address before I go. Or if you like, I'll write myself."

"Oh, no, thank you kindly all the same. I'd sooner—I mean, I'll think it over. And now I must go and see to my oven. Your mother's having a baked custard."

She left the room on a sudden *coufage* born of the memory of having once punched Meg's nose.

No sooner had she gone out than Diana came in. She had been to church at Rushmonden.

"Hullo," said Meg, "successful outing?"

"Oh, yes, quite. Maudie was there—Lady Mallender, you know—and she introduced me to Diamond Freethorn."

"Who on earth is Diamond Freethorn?"

"Oh, Meg, you know, I told you. Dr. Freethorn's wife, who was brought up by Sir Charles Mallender."

"Yes, I remember now, supposed by a charitable neighborhood to be his own daughter."

"Well, she probably was."

Meg said nothing and Diana began to take off her hat and arrange her hair in front of the looking glass.

"Do you remember her mother?" she asked.

"No. I was much too young."

"I suppose you were, but I shall never forget her. She was the curate's wife and the local adventuress."

"Rather an unusual combination."

"Yes, wasn't it? And her name was Daisy Brown. The Mallenders used to call her the burning bush, because she always wore red. Sir Charles Mallender was known to be in love with her."

"With an adventuress in red?"

"Yes. She was very attractive, you know. The men all fell for her."

Diana seemed to be enjoying the conversation, and Meg wondered why.

"Anyone would know Mrs. Freethorn was her daughter," she continued, "she's exactly like her—to look at, I mean."

"That's a piece of luck for the father," said Meg impatiently, "if he isn't who he ought to be. But I'm not really interested in Mrs. Freethorn. I'm much more interested in her husband. He really is extraordinarily good for a country G.P. I came here fully expecting we should have to send to London for a specialist, but really it hasn't been necessary. He's done everything that could be done and Mother couldn't be improving faster."

Diana seemed affronted by this sudden changing of the conversation. She made no reply.

"Are you going up to see her?" asked Meg.

"In a moment," picking up her hat and gloves and prayerbook. "Who's with her now?"

"Nobody, unless it's Nanny. Martin's enduring a walk with his children rather than let them play with the little Hovendens. I meant to go up, but Bess Hovenden came in and I so much wanted a chat with her that I stayed here."

"Why on earth did you want a chat with Bess?"

"Well, it seemed a pity I shouldn't know her better, considering what pals we used to be as children. But after trying to talk to her for half an hour I've begun to doubt if there's anything to know. There's always this layer of secrecy wrapped round the minds of country people. I could see her shifting and hedging on quite indifferent subjects, and in the end I lost patience and asked her a few straight questions."

"And did she give you straight answers?"

"I don't think she could help it—I'd got her fairly cornered. I daresay it was brutal of me, but I really felt annoyed by her assumption that we none of us know anything about Dick."

Diana, who had been on her way out of the room, evidently as uninterested in Meg's topic as Meg had been in hers, took her hand off the doorknob and came back.

"You mean about his drinking?"

"Quite so. We're supposed to know nothing about it."

"But everybody knows—at least Maudie Mallender knows, and I suppose that means everybody."

"Of course they know. You couldn't have a man getting blind every other week for twenty-five years in a small country neighborhood and people not know it. Bess must be well aware that it's a public scandal, and yet she thinks we can stay here and not find out."

"He's been all right ever since we came."

Diana had settled herself in an armchair and reached for her workbag.

"Yes; apparently he had a bout just before we arrived. He has them roughly every fortnight or three weeks."

"You got that out of her?"

"I did—and, as I say, I feel a beast, for she obviously didn't want to tell me anything. But I do hate to see people trying to deceive me and only succeeding in deceiving themselves. Besides, he ought to have treatment."

"Medical treatment?"

"Psychological treatment. I believe Dr. McLellan would have him in his clinic. But of course she won't hear of it, and it's impossible to cure drunkenness while people like her will regard it from the moral and not the medical point of view. With them it's an act of God—or rather, I suppose, the devil—and not to be cured except by arguments and persuasions which they must realize by this time are no use at all."

"I wonder what started him off," said Diana, rummaging in the bag for her scissors. "Did you say he's been at it for twenty-five years?"

"She said from quite a young chap, and I gather from some earlier remarks of hers that it must have started fairly soon after our last visit. Of course it's due to some maladjustment—probably of infantile origin. That's why I suggested a psychiatrist."

"I remember," said Diana, with a faint smile, "that he was always different from the others, not nearly so rough."

"No—and you can see that he has artistic tastes, though hopelessly untrained and undeveloped. He was probably always odd



man out in the family, out of tune with his surroundings, and that type is liable to start drinking if anything sets him off."

"What sort of thing? Some shock or disappointment?"

"It needn't be anything like that. He might just have started going to the pub as soon as he was old enough, with his father and brothers, and found in drink an escape they'd never taken because they didn't need it."

"You mean an escape from his ordinary life?"

"From his ordinary life."

Diana smiled again, and Meg again wondered at the sort of conversation she enjoyed.

Bess slammed the kitchen door and stood trembling.

"What's the matter?" asked George Hovenden, lifting his eyes from *The People*.

"Mrs. Cayless," said Bess in a muted voice, "she's found out about Dick."

George whistled gently.

"I wonder at that. He's been himself ever since she came."

"I know—I know. It isn't his fault. I can't think how . . ."

Tears were coming fast and choked her.

"Now," said George. "Now, my dear."

"I—I can't help it. It's all so terrible—now she knows."

"But she's going away tomorrow, and I don't suppose she'll ever come back."

"She may tell her mother, Mrs. Laurelwood. I can't tell her not to tell anyone. I can't . . . I mean I can't talk to her about it. It was terrible her asking those questions. And to think how we used to play together when we were children."

She sank down on a chair by the table and began to sob. George rose and clumsily patted her shoulder.

"Now, don't take on, Missus. I don't suppose she'll tell her mother. It ain't a thing you talk to invalids about."

"You never know, she might. Mrs. Laurelwood might say something that would lead to it."

"And if she did I can't see what difference it would make."

"You don't understand," she shook her head wearily, "I should be so ashamed."

"Well, I reckon we're all ashamed. But we bear it. You don't mind Nell and Jim and Jass knowing about him, and I bet a good many others too."

"It's different."

"I don't see any difference."

She repeated, "You don't understand."

He went back to his chair.

"You're right. I don't understand you and your Laurelwoods. And my notion is we've had more than enough of them here. What was it you were telling me about the old lady wanting to come back?"

"She wants to bring the children here in August. She asked me if the rooms were free."

"Well, you can tell her you've remembered now that they ain't."

Bess said nothing. Her tears dried slowly while she thought. At last she said: "She said he ought to have treatment."

"Who? Dick? What for?"

"Alcoholism she called it. She said it's a disease and wants mental treatment."

"Mental! Dick isn't mental—shows no sign of it. She's talking wild."

"That's what I thought. She talked of having something dug out of him, as if it was a growth. She said she knew someone who'd do it if he went away."

"To an asylum?"

"I don't know. She called it a clinic, but I couldn't make sure what she meant. Anyhow I said he'd never go away. He'd be wretched if he did. He's happy with us. Poor Dick!"

Her sobs began again.

"Now look here," said George, "that Mrs. Cayless has been talking a lot of rubbish and you're soft if you believe what she says. A growth, indeed. I wonder at your being so simple."

"She—she didn't say a growth."

"But according to you she talked of its being dug out. And what do you dig out if it isn't a growth? The woman's a fool. What on earth does she think they'll find inside him if they cut him open? A bottle of whisky?"

He doubled up with laughter.

Bess was not offended at his laughter, but she did not stop crying. She had not really expected him to understand. She did not even herself quite understand what it was that made her feel that Lardner shames became ten times worse when known to Laurelwoods.

Mrs. Laurelwood was enjoying her baked custard. It was not Mrs. Hovenden's most successful effort, for it had curdled, but she felt all the comfort of being allowed to sit up in bed and eat reasonably accustomed food. She was also enjoying Diana's company.

"Really, dear," she said, "it's worth being ill to have you all here again at Idolsfold."

"It's nice to be here," Diana gazed across the room at her own face hanging youthfully veiled by distance in the mirror over the dressing table. "I'm enjoying it now that you're so much better. It's been nice seeing the place again and meeting old friends. Some new ones too, though the one I met this morning I could almost believe I'd seen before, she was so like her."

"What do you mean, dear? I don't understand."

Diana smiled at the prospect of entertaining herself and her mother with the conversation that had bored her sister Meg.

"I'm sure *you*'ll be interested for you always were interested in the people we used to know here. I tried to tell Meg about some of them when I got home from church, but she was only bored. She isn't really interested in people, only in psychology and things like that."

"Tell *me*, then, dear. Who did you see in Church?"

"Oh, the Bensons—they're still living at Rushmonden, though he's retired; and Maudie Mallender—Colenutt that was. She asked me to tell you she hopes to call on you as soon as you're well enough. And she introduced Mrs. Freethorn."

"Our doctor's wife?"

"That's it. Her name is Diamond—just the sort of name her mother would choose."

"Who is her mother?"

"Don't you know? I was sure Bess would have told you in one of her gossips."

"Bess doesn't gossip."

"That must be a change. I remember how old Mrs. Lardner would stand talking to you for hours. But I'm sure Bess knows all about Sir Charles Mallender's adopted daughter."

"Who's that, dear?"

Perhaps it was because she was ill that she found Diana's conversation so difficult to follow.

"I'm telling you—Diamond Freethorn, or Diamond Brown as

she was then. You remember, we were talking yesterday about the wicked Mrs. Brown."

"Yes, of course . . . the curate's wife."

"That's it, the one the Mallenders used to call the burning bush. I'll never forget her at their garden party. Did you ever speak to her?"

"Never."

"No, people didn't. Except Father. I remember him at that very same garden party going up to her and talking to her, out of good nature, because no one else would. She was supposed to be Sir Charles's *belle amie*."

"Indeed."

"Yes. I wonder you didn't hear the gossip at the time. I did, though of course I wouldn't tell you. But Mrs. Lardner must have known. Anyway, this is Maudie's story. Daisy Brown died soon after we came here for the last time, leaving a little girl whom her husband swore wasn't his. I think he behaved very badly, for he married again almost at once and refused to keep the child. If Sir Charles hadn't taken her she'd have had to go into a home. But of course everybody says that *he* was the father."

"Probably."

In the mirror a gleam of sunlight fetched Diana's face out of its youthful veil into a harsh and sudden middle age. This and the shortness of her mother's replies made her look in her direction.

"Mother, are you all right? You look tired."

"I *am* a little tired, darling. But I'm quite all right."

"Your hand's shaking. You aren't so equal to things as you imagine."

"It's time for my rest, you know. I'll be quite all right when I've had my sleep."

Diana took away her plate.

"Let me make you comfortable."

"Thank you, dear, but if you'll call Nanny . . . She knows exactly how I like things. Better let her settle me."

The Sunday beef was on the table, and Arthur had been naughty enough to lift the dishcover to see if the potatoes were baked or boiled. Bess remembered how in the old days only one joint had been cooked, and the Lardners had had to wait for their Sunday dinner until the Laurelwoods had finished theirs. But she knew that her present family would not stand for that, so she had cooked

two separate ribs of beef and two separate Yorkshire puddings, and as she and her husband and brother and children sat round the table they could hear the other family rattling their plates and knives and tongues in the next room.

"Well," said George Hovenden, "whatever anyone else is doing I'm going to have a sleep this afternoon. And if you're wise, Missus, so will you."

"I may, for a few minutes," said Bess. She would not argue, but never had she felt less inclined for sleep.

"You need it more than anyone. You've had a busy morning, cooking two dinners—three, if you count what Mrs. Laurelwood had. You look fagged to death. I shall be glad for your sake as well as my own when those people go off tomorrow. And remember, this is the last time we have them here."

"I never reckoned to have so many, but with the poor old lady being taken ill, what else could I do?"

"I know. Howsomever, she's better now, and I hope the next attack she has will be in her own home. I won't have her coming here and doing all this to you again."

Bess said nothing, but June chimed in.

"Tim and Angela say they're coming back in August."

"Well, they ain't," said George. "We've had enough of that family."

"But don't say anything to them about it," hastily put in Bess.

"Why?"

"Because I say so."

She had not meant to speak so sharply, but she was tired and upset, and now she could think of no soft cover to put over her words. Silence fell on the table, as if they had all been rebuked. June was sulking, George and Arthur were eating busily and Dick was trying to hide as much of his food as possible under his knife and fork. She watched him anxiously. Loss of appetite was generally a prelude to one of his "turns." Was he going to have another? Surely not; he was only just out of the last. But perhaps all this fuss and trouble over Mrs. Laurelwood had upset him . . . She felt sick. It would be dreadful if he started having them oftener. Generally they were a fortnight or three weeks apart, but only a few years ago it had not been more than once a month, and in the old days there had been quite long intervals.

"I suppose it happens oftener and oftener." It did, but she felt she really could not bear it if it happened every week. "Every

time anything upsets him." She remembered how when Mother had died he had been bad every day for a fortnight. But what could have upset him now? He couldn't care all that for Mrs. Laurelwood; besides, she was getting well. Perhaps it had not been good for him to meet the younger Laurelwoods again. She remembered noticing how tired he looked yesterday after showing his pictures to Mrs. Cayless and Mrs. Hurlbutt-Taylor. Perhaps she ought not to have suggested it; but she had thought it would do him good. How difficult it was to act always for the best.

"Dick," she said gently, "eat up your batter."

"Thank you, but I really can't eat any more."

"Don't you like it? Isn't it nice?"

She remembered how she had dropped a tear into Mrs. Laurelwood's custard.

"Oh, yes, it's ever so nice, Bess, I always say you make nicer batter than anybody. But I've eaten a lot, I really have. I can't eat any more."

Bess sighed and shook her head. Then: "What are you doing this afternoon?" she asked brightly.

"He's coming with us to the children's church," said June, leaping out of her sulks. "Teacher said we could have 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' for the hymn, and he likes that."

"I think that's a good idea," said Bess. "But take your macs with you, for I'm afraid it's going to rain."

"I'll see that Uncle Dick takes his mac," said June maternally, "and I'll ask Teacher if he may choose the second hymn as well. What would you like for the second hymn, Uncle?"

Dick's eyebrows met in thought.

"'Jerusalem the Golden'?" he suggested, anxious to choose their favorite rather than his own.

"That will do very well," said June. "Mother, if Uncle isn't finishing his batter, may I eat it?"

The Laurelwoods were quarreling. Or if they were not, it sounded exactly like it. Bess could hear their raised, angry voices as she cleared away the dinner in the kitchen, after having taken in the cheese. They had seemed all right then. Martin was saying that he would take Tim and Angela to church at Rushmonden and they had both been very pleased to go. They had run off with Nanny Wheeler to be made ready. They would walk all the way there and come back in the bus.

It was the grown-up people, not the children who were quarrelling, and Bess felt a little ashamed of them. They must have forgotten the family in the next room. Luckily, there was no one there now but herself to hear them, and she herself could not be sure if she had heard aright till she had listened more closely. Not that she would demean herself to listen at the keyhole, but when her work had brought her to the end of the table nearest to the door she stood still for a moment and heard Martin say: "So that's what I am, am I? A stuffy little lawyer?" and Meg's voice answer, "Yes, that's what you are." Really, grown-up people ought not to talk like that.

To do them justice the Laurelwoods were by this time a little ashamed of themselves, and Diana had remembered a possible audience.

"Hush," she said, "they'll hear you in the kitchen."

"Then," said Martin in a grandiose voice, "they'll hear me demand an apology."

"From me?" asked Meg.

"From you."

"Very well, then, I apologize. Take your apology, hug it and be happy. But do please let Mother have her way over the children."

"Why should I? I'm their father."

"But you won't really mind if you don't take them away with you for the summer holidays, while she'll be wretched if you don't let her bring them here."

"My dear girl, I'm the last person in this family who's likely to do anything to make her wretched; and she's quite free to have the children with her all the summer, anywhere but at Idolsfold. But even to please her, I'm not going to let them grow up into oafs and hooligans, and you can see for yourself what they'll turn into if they spend all their time with those Hovenden louts."

Meg said: "I don't think loutery is catching, not, at least, by people like Tim and Angela. Besides, surely the right thing isn't for you to take them away to Cromer but to come with them here. Mother would be simply overjoyed to have you, and judging by the way you're playing policeman this week end June and Arthur won't get a dog's chance of making oafs of your children."

Diana said: "I'm sure Mother's just as anxious as you are that they shouldn't turn into louts. After all, she took very decided steps when she thought there was a chance of *your* going that way with Dick and Clarence."

Martin blew up at this, but Bess was no longer listening. She stood rigid, her eyes dark with indignation. So that was what the Laurelwoods really thought of the Hovendens, of the Lardners . . . louts, oafs, hooligans . . . that was what they had probably thought, the grown-up ones, all the time that the Lardners were worshiping them. Poor Mother. Well, that settled it; everything was over now. She would tell Mrs. Laurelwood when she went away that she had made a mistake about the rooms and could not have her back. She had promised some London visitors. She would be glad to have London visitors again, who would admire her warming pan and copper kettle and perhaps want to buy them. Mrs. Laurelwood had not even noticed them. All she had been interested in was the old sideboard which used to be there when they first came.

George was right. They must not be allowed to start all over again. But up till that moment she had not made up her own mind. She had made it up now. She was as much against their coming back as he was. It had been all very well for Mother to worship and wait on the "Family," but things had changed since then. She was not going to bring up June and Arthur as she had been brought up. Oafs, louts, hooligans—that was what they had called her children. The smoke in her eyes changed to fire. She wanted to rush into the next room and tell them what she thought of them, despising her children, meddling with poor Dick. She wanted to do to them what she had done to Meg all those years ago. Meg had hit her first then. Meg had hit her first now. If the Lardners were really oafs and hooligans she would hit her back now as she had done then. Oh, how she would love to knock those glasses off that superior face. In her rage she forgot that the latest, fiercest insult had come from Martin.

"I shan't be robbing her of them—she can have them all the rest of the year" . . . "You can't take them away yourself without Nanny Wheeler and Mother would be absolutely lost."

The voices wrangled on, but there was now a smile on Bess's face as she moved out of hearing. Let them argue. It made no difference. Let them get hot and bothered and lose their tempers and insult one another and apologize. It was all the same. They did not know it, but they were wasting words. They thought the decision rested with them, but it did not. It rested with the louts and the louts had decided that this was the last time the Laurelwoods came to Idolsfold . . . "and they can go on asking themselves for another twenty years why they gave up coming."



Diana usually lay down on her bed for half an hour in the afternoon. She did not always sleep, but indulged in a sort of quiescence which, she was convinced, had kept her mind and body much younger than her years. For this relaxation it was essential that the world should be quiet both within and without. All kinds of dyspepsia, mental or physical, prevented repose, and as a rule she was careful to avoid at luncheon anything in the way of food or thought which she considered upsetting. At home it was easy. On weekdays she ate alone now that Beryl was married, and on week ends there was only Jim, who of course adored her and would no more dream of saying anything that she did not like than Cook would dream of sending in anything that disagreed with her.

But life was not so good at Idolsfold, especially this afternoon. Martin and Meg seemed to enjoy having rows, and she could not help being dragged into them and taking sides, though she did not often really know which side she was on. At lunch today Meg had been right when she called Martin a stuffy little lawyer—right but rude. On the other hand, Diana could not make up her mind that Martin was wrong in his determination to prevent the Idolsfold holidays starting again. Why couldn't Mother take the children to some place like Frinton, where nice people went in the summer? If she did, Diana might be able to persuade Jim to spend part of his holiday there—or Beryl could take Richard. Mother ought not to be alone now she had started these heart attacks, and she ought not to come to a place where the accommodation was so very rough. But the way Martin did things made you want to take sides against him, and taking sides, or worse still, wanting to take sides without being quite sure which, was a very poor preparation for half an hour's repose.

She looked at her face in the glass and thought it seemed flushed. That must be Bess Hovenden's Yorkshire pudding, batter she called it in her ignorant South Country way, a horrible, soggy mess. She should not have eaten it, but it was awkward leaving things if you knew the people who had cooked them . . . that was another reason why Mother should not come back here. She needed careful dieting, and poor Bess was no cook.

Confronted by a second enemy to relaxation Diana decided to give up the attempt. She would only feel worse if she lay down. What should she do instead? She had nothing to read now that she had finished her magazine. She had better manicure her nails. It was a soothing process and they needed attention.

She sat down at her dressing table and opened her manicure case. But instead of going to work, her hand fell to her lap, where it lay motionless as she stared out of the window. Her room was not her old room, but it had the same outlook into the farmyard. Here very little had changed. The barns still formed three sides of what might have been the quadrangle of some rustic college, with the old farm well as its central fountain. Only the midden had been cleared away to some place more in keeping with the amenities of a guest house. The space it had covered heaved this way and that, according to how its escape runnels had worn down the flags. And there alone in the wide emptiness stood Dick Lardner, much as he had stood more than twenty years ago gazing up at her window—except that he was not gazing up, but down at some small flowers which had seeded themselves in the crevices of the wellhead.

Diana's hand moved from her lap, but to her powder bowl instead of to her manicure case. She dusted away the unbecoming flush and pulled a curl down lower on her forehead. Could he see her if he looked up? Why did he not look up and see her?

She picked up her nail file, and still Dick did not look up. He was smoothing the little cushion of flowers with his hand. Diana watched him and suddenly made up her mind. After putting a touch of carmine on her lips, she smiled at herself in the glass and left the room. A minute later she was in the yard, where Dick was now picking the tiny flowers and trying to arrange them in his buttonhole.

She must have startled him, for when he looked up there was positive panic in his eyes. For a moment his eyes hurt her. They were so innocent, so unlike the eyes of a middle-aged alcoholic. They were the eyes of the boy whom years ago she had loved. She knew then that she had loved Dick as well as been loved by him. The knowledge gave an unexpected embarrassment to her greeting.

"Hullo," she said.

He mumbled: "Good afternoon," and his eyes now looked past her to the house, where the door stood open. "I'm looking for June and Arthur," he said. "I'm going with them to church."

"To Copstreet?"

"Yes. I'd better go and see if they're ready."

But she had recovered herself.

"They won't be ready yet, it's only half-past two. Don't go. I want to ask you something." She stood between him and the door

and her eyes held his again. "There's something I'd like you to do for me."

He looked ill, she could see that now. His face seemed haggard, the cheeks fallen in, and his eyes were like lamps that have flared up on their last oil. But he said nothing.

"Would you," she continued, "let me have that picture Father painted of Pigeon Hoo? The one with Mrs. Brown in it."

"Oh, yes, of course," he said breathlessly. "I'd be pleased."

"That's very good of you. It's for my mother—she hasn't any of the pictures he painted that last summer we were here, and I'm sure she'd like to have that one."

He repeated, "I'd be pleased."

"I hope I'm not asking you for anything you want to keep yourself. My brother and sister both said they didn't think you'd care to part with it, but I said I was sure you would if I asked."

Of course now you could see that he drank. His hands were shaking. But he looked quite presentable, more presentable than in the old days; she remembered how she had thought him oafish in his Sunday blacks. This Sunday he had on rather a nice tweed suit, and his tie and handkerchief had evidently been chosen with care. If only she could help him get back his lost integrity . . . Why didn't he speak?

"Dick," she said. "I want you to forgive me."

That had roused him. His eyes opened wide, almost bolting as they stared at the door behind her. She went on.

"You see, I feel responsible for your—your present difficulties. I know that some people would say they're only due to maladjustment, the need to escape from ordinary life. I've heard all that psychological jargon a hundred times, but I don't believe in it. I know there was a shock once. Because I gave it to you."

"Please don't," he said hoarsely, "don't talk about it."

"But I want to say I'm sorry."

"Please don't."

"Of course we were both very young, and I've been through so much since—losing my first husband in the Great War—that it all seems very long ago. But, Dick, I really am sorry for the harm I've done and I do want you to promise me to try and pull yourself together. I believe you can. I believe in you still, you know. Won't you let me help you?"

Her memories of him had lost their embarrassment. They too

wore a presentable Sunday suit. She smiled, so sure of herself that she expected him to smile back. But he did not.

"Do let me, Dick. Do let me be your friend and try to undo what I have done."

"No, please . . . that's all right. It isn't your doing."

She shook her head and smiled again.

"You're very chivalrous, but I'm afraid it is. I must take the blame."

Again he said, "No please . . ." He was looking away from her toward the orchard, and suddenly he mumbled, "Excuse me, I must go. The children are waiting for me."

"Well, I'll see you again before we leave tomorrow. You won't forget the picture?"

She could not hear what he said as he turned away. He did not go past her into the house, but across the yard to the orchard. She watched him disappear behind the roundel of the oast, and then strolled back indoors. She would go up to her room again and have her nap after all. She felt composed and ready for sleep.

Bess could not clear away the dinner because Meg was still in the dining room. It was a nuisance and added a feeling of frustration to the distresses of the day. Why was she reading there instead of in the sitting room? Because, no doubt, she expected Bess to come in to clear away and would then go on with her conversation about Dick where it had been broken off. Well, she would be disappointed, that's all. Bess would rather leave the dinner things unwashed till supper time than face another discussion of the undiscussable.

What should she do while she was waiting? She had better make some cakes. The oven was hot and it was nice to have cakes for tea on Sunday . . . some scones and fairy cakes. Mother used to make fairy cakes for the Laurelwoods and she remembered how lovely it was to be given one all crisp and hot before they went into the new part. Hers should not be for the Laurelwoods but for her own family. June and Arthur should enjoy them just as she had; and George would enjoy them too and perhaps Dick would be tempted to eat some when he came back from "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

The time was gone when the Laurelwoods had the best of everything and the Lardners only what they left. Today the Laurelwoods would have to manage with what remained of the cakes she had

made and bought when they arrived. The good tea, the delicious Sunday tea, should be for the louts. Her face hardened as she measured the flour. Then suddenly she was sorry for it all. What a pity it was!—a pity and a disappointment. She had been pleased at the thought of meeting them again, especially Meg. But now she wished most ardently they had never come. It was disappointing to meet people again after more than twenty years. They changed too much. She wondered if it was always like that, if human beings were always nicer as children than when they were grown up, just as lambs are nicer than sheep and kittens than cats . . .

She became aware that her own two children were in the room. "Hullo, you two. Ready to start? Where's your uncle?"

June said demurely: "He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. We were waiting for him inside the back door while he was in the yard talking to Mrs. Hurlbutt-Taylor. Then instead of coming in he went off into the orchard, and then we saw him sneaking down the Owl Field by the hedge."

Bess did not wait to hear more.

"He's gone for the bus," she cried, "we must stop him."

Forgotten were her cakes, forgotten were her children, forgotten was Meg in the next room, forgotten was Mrs. Laurelwood having her afternoon sleep.

"Dick!" she cried. "Dick!" She ran out of the kitchen door and down the home meadow toward the stile on the footpath to Boldshaves.

"It's no good, Mummy. He'll have got to the road by this time."

But Bess still ran, calling frantically, "Dick! Stop! Oh, somebody stop him! Dick!"

Her voice could not fail to tear the frail cobwebs of Mrs. Laurelwood's sleep, but it did not come as an unpleasant sound. As a sort of wordless cry it reached her mind and led it back along familiar ways to happy times long past. Somebody shouting . . . the children calling out at their games . . . a voice raised on the farm . . . someone wanted someone . . . silence fell.

She was awake and did not know how long she had been asleep. It seemed an age since Nanny had left her, after smoothing her shaken pillows and tucking in the bedclothes. Beside the bed was a little traveling clock and the hands were close to three. So she

had been asleep for nearly an hour, and another hour was to run before Nanny came back. Unless, of course, she rang the little Swiss bell beside the clock. Then Nanny would come in at once, to soothe and settle her again. But she would not disturb her. Nanny was getting old too and needed her rest.

There was a pain at her heart, not the physical pain which had frightened her so, but that other sort of pain which so seldom came now. It was years since she had felt it, and she supposed it was her illness and weakness that had made her vulnerable to it again. But when Diana had started all that talk about Mrs. Brown it had somehow been too much for her shaken spirit. An old sorrow had lurked in her sleep and was still with her now that she had wakened.

Of course it was silly to let it hurt. It had happened so long ago, and they were dead, both of them. She had not known that Daisy Brown was dead. The break with Idolsfold had been complete. For two years she had gone on sending Christmas cards, but she had never written and nor had they. Of course Daisy Brown would have been almost elderly now, though not as old as she was. But it was a surprise to hear that she was dead—had died so soon.

She would have heard about it if she had done anything to get in touch with the Mallenders on her return to Idolsfold. But somehow they had not seemed to matter. It was not to them she had come back. She had come back to the Lardners, to all that she could harvest of a relationship in which the Mallenders had had no share. Those social occasions which had once seemed so important she now saw to be no true part of the pattern of Idolsfold.

That pattern was made up of the sayings and doings of homely people, whose devotion had comforted her as no equal exchanges within the cage of her own class had the power to do. Mrs. Lardner standing with her hands folded over her apron, Mr. Lardner respectfully blowing on his tea at the harvest picnic, Joe and Dick driving the wagonette with its happy smell of stables, dear little Bess sucking her thumb and gazing up bashfully through the hair that had tumbled into her eyes—those were the things she wanted with her now. Of course she loved her children, and, still more, her children's children, but it was not for them she had come questing at the end of life. It was not their love she had plucked like a flower to wear on her heart as it stopped beating.

For of course she knew that she was dying. The children might say what they liked and the doctor congratulate her on a marvelous

recovery. But she had watched these things in other people and she knew that the last process had begun. She would go through all this again, and again, and again; and each time her recovery would be slower and her life in the space between more like the death that was coming. She did not expect to die at once, or even soon; not this month, nor perhaps this year. But she had a strong feeling now—suddenly risen up out of nowhere—that this was her last visit to Idolsfold.

In that case how thankful she was that she had been able to come back for this glimpse, this greeting, this farewell. It would have been sad to have died without seeing the place again and renewing her memories. Oh how I wish, she thought, as she lay in the silence, for the crying voice was still, how I wish I could go back to those dear happy days and live through them again. All those summers—except the last.

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## FRANCES LAURELWOOD

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THEY HAD ARRIVED. THEY WERE BACK AT IDOLSFOLD, AND THE MONTHS between seemed to float away and join the other months in limbo. There must now be enough months in limbo to make several years, while the sum of life at Idolsfold could not amount to more than three. But in those three summer years everything in her life that was significant and satisfying had happened.

It was at Idolsfold that she had first met Harry, it was there that he had proposed to her, there that they had started their honeymoon. There she had first known she was to have a child, there she had first brought that first child, to show Mrs. Lardner and from her delighted admiration drink a new draught of motherhood.

Mrs. Lardner had been married a few years longer than herself, though she was actually of the same age. Granny Lardner had been the "Mrs. Lardner" of her first visit, when she had come to stay for a fortnight with her school friend Gertrude Laurelwood in 1889. Mrs. Lardner had in those days been "Jack Lardner's Emily Vine," in the same relation to the eldest son of the farm as she had found herself two years later to her father's articled clerk. She remembered her then as a tall, awkward girl, brown-skinned but with a rich, bright color on her cheeks. Once on a Sunday afternoon she and Harry had walked behind her and Jack in the lane by Haffenden Quarter, and they had grinned at each other and their eyes had danced because the other couple were so stiff, walking primly



arm in arm and never even talking. Then next year, when they came back, old Mr. Lardner was dead and Jack was the farmer of Idolsfold; and his Emily Vine was Mrs. Lardner, whereas Frances had to wait another three years before she was Mrs. Laurelwood.

Emily Vine had been Mrs. Lardner now for twenty-two summer visits. She had seen the Laurelwood party change from Dr. and Mrs. Laurelwood, with their daughters Gertrude and Elizabeth and their son Harry and his fiancée Frances Raikes, to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Laurelwood with their daughters Diana and Margaret and their sons Martin and Stanley and their nurse Elizabeth Wheeler.

Mrs. Lardner was always the first to welcome them, standing at the door in her starched white apron and black afternoon dress, like a superior servant who yet was no servant but a valued family friend. It was then that the comfort, the release, of Idolsfold began. The journey had been mixed of care and anticipation, but now the cares were over and anticipation was emptied in delight.

"Well, here you are, mum," the same always.

"Yes, here we are, and so glad to be back."

"We're glad to see you, mum, I'm sure. I hope you're all well."

"Yes, thank you"—Now that Meg is out of quarantine, or Mr. Laurelwood's got rid of his lumbago, or Nanny's had her tooth out, according to recent vicissitudes—"I hope you're the same."

"Yes, mum, thank you, nicely, all of us," with any similar reservations. "I hope you had a good journey, mum. Would you like to go upstairs? I've put a can of hot water in your room."

Frances Laurelwood went up to the back bedroom. The front room, where the old Laurels had always slept, was now the nursery. She had made it the nursery when Diana paid her first visit, at three months old. Her husband's parents had both died during the first year of her marriage—it was sad to think that they never saw their grandchildren—and their bedroom should properly have been hers. But she had decided to make it the nursery. It was much more suitable for the purpose than the back room, which would do very well for herself and Harry, for though called the back room, it did not look out on the farmyard, but on the side of the house, where three tall Lombardy poplars cleft a view of woods and fields rolling away to the southeast. It was small, of course, and the window was only a casement, but, as she told everybody, it was only right that baby Diana should have the best room.

Deep in her heart she knew that she was glad to have so good

an excuse for making the change. She did not want to sleep in the only room in the house where she had been unhappy.

When she and Harry set out for their honeymoon they had gone no farther than Idolsfold. The prolonged festival of the wedding had made it impossible to catch the four o'clock boat train, and her mother and Harry's had both agreed that it would be unwise for the young people to start on a night journey after all the exhaustions of the day.

It was Frances herself who had thought of Idolsfold as an improvement on the Grand Hotel at Folkestone. They could be driven to Ashford the next morning in time to catch the midday boat. And Idolsfold, dear Idolsfold, which had witnessed her first meeting with Harry, the first blossoming of their love and all its flowery growth through five summers would now give its blessing to that love's fulfillment in maturity. So her head planned as her heart dreamed.

The plan was approved by all. It had a pleasant, sentimental glow about it which affected even tough old Dr. Laurelwood. Everyone said: "How delighted the Lardners will be." And of course they were. Never had Laurelwood entered a more beaming house, beaming with smiles, with flowers, with furniture polish. The supper table was spread with all the best a farm could offer, another marriage feast. The first meal together as Mr. and Mrs. Laurelwood. The lamp shone on the table and the stars shone through the window and Frances' eyes shone under her curled fringe. How much nicer this was than going to a hotel.

But Idolsfold had no more power than a hotel to save her from disillusion. Lamplight and starlight could do no more for her than electric light, and all darkness is the same. She woke at dawn. The window was white and unfamiliar objects detached themselves from the shadows. This was not a room she knew, she had been in it very seldom, and now it seemed unfriendly; it seemed still to belong to the old Laurelwoods. And had they in all the twenty-odd summers they had occupied it know nothing more rapturous or romantic than she knew now? Was this the great secret of marriage? Was this all?

If she had known what she knew now she would never have left the dear little room above the farmyard, with its flowery walls and low, friendly ceiling. Oh, how she longed to be back there. Burying her face in the pillow, she smelled sweet lavender and tasted tears.

Disillusion and desolation beat their wings over her. She was like someone who has eagerly climbed a mountain for the view and from the top sees nothing but factory chimneys and rows of drab houses. What exactly had she expected? She did not know—except that it had been something worthy of the night, worthy of the stars, worthy of the earthy, leafy, flowery scent that had poured into the room when she opened the window, worthy of her own happy memories of love at Idolsfold.

The dawn filled itself with saffron and the room with furniture. She could see Harry's clothes folded on a chair. If she turned over she would see Harry. She could feel him close to her, hear him breathing; yet never had he seemed so far away. He seemed further from her even than the awkward schoolboy who had gazed at her silently across the table on the first day of her first visit. He seemed further than the quiet companion of her walks which he had become before that visit was over, further than in those days when he had been only Gertrude's brother and then young Laurelwood in her father's office . . . and further, infinitely further, than the eager young man who had seized her hand on the steps of the oast barn and kissed her breathlessly in a breathless August dusk. Her tears thickened into sobs as she swallowed them.

The room was now swimming in daylight, and out of doors she could hear the farm awaking. A cow lowed, pails clanked, a cart came creaking past the house. Indoors there were noises too, foot-steps and voices. Then she heard a baby cry. That must be little Emmy, born only a month ago, Mrs. Lardner's second child. The thought of Mrs. Lardner brought a strange, sudden comfort. For a moment she seemed to lean up against her, to feel the support of that thin, strong shoulder in its cotton sleeve. Mrs. Lardner had been through all this and seemed content. Probably her expectations had not been so high—the lower orders, Frances told herself, had not much imagination—but no doubt she too had had her disappointments, her recoils, her regrets. Yet she was obviously a happy woman, happy in her husband and home and children.

Children. There lay the explanation, the reason, the apology for it all. That was what she must look forward to—children, a large family of children. Oh, how she hoped that she and Harry would have children. She would like to have two girls and two boys. After all, that was what marriage was for, and it was impossible, or at least wrong, to have children any other way. "Oh, God," she prayed in the gathering light, "please send me children."

She was growing stiff, lying in one position on the uttermost edge of the bed. She turned herself cautiously, so as not to wake Harry. There he lay, looking so very young in his sleep, so like a child himself, that her heart was moved with pity and tenderness. Poor Harry! It was not his fault marriage was like that. There had been a moment in which she had blamed him, thought he was making the worst of a bad job, but her resentment died as she looked at his sleeping face and thought of their children.

She and Harry and the children were all one thing. A family was a unity that a couple could never be. That was why she had been pleased when Diana came so quickly. For no more than a few weeks had she and Harry been only two people. Directly she knew a baby was coming she had felt herself one of three. They had remained three for longer than she would have chosen. After two miscarriages she had been really afraid that Diana would be an only child. Then Martin had come, and after two more failures, Margaret. She had lost hope of the four she had prayed for that night at Idolsfold. But then at last, almost at the end of her child-bearing age, Stanley had been born, making her quartet. She had been very ill, and the doctor had said she would have no more children. But she did not mind. She had got what she wanted.

Harry did not mind either. Four children were quite enough. Indeed, some men would have thought them too many in these hard times when income tax was one and twopence in the pound. He was now in his own person the firm of Raikes and Laurelwood, his father-in-law having died in 1903. But the business though high class did not bring in more than a moderate income. There were none of those side lines or specializations that make lawyers rich. It was just an old-fashioned family business, fifty marriage settlements to one divorce.

Frances often said it was a good thing that they were never tempted to indulge in expensive holidays. Many of their friends spent large sums traveling abroad or going on long journeys to Scotland or Ireland, but it was inconceivable that the Laurelwoods should go anywhere but to Idolsfold. And Idolsfold was so cheap. All that country air and lovely country food cost less, much less, than staying at some stuffy foreign hotel and eating unwholesome foreign meals. There was something, too, about the expedition that appealed to her sense of fitness—a nice English family setting out together to a nice English farm, where another nice English family, conveniently inferior in rank, welcomed them and waited on them.

How much better and more suitable that was than going among people they knew nothing about, who might be dishonest or immoral, and to whom their visit meant no more than their money.

"Oh, no, we never feel inclined to go anywhere else," she would say to Mrs. Clarke or Mrs. French or Mrs. Stanford-Collins when they discussed their summer plans.

Once Mrs. Clarke had said: "I should have thought your husband might want to go abroad to sketch," looking round at the water colors on the drawing-room wall.

"Oh, no," she had replied, "he finds plenty to sketch at Idolsfold."

"I'm sure he does," said Mrs. Clarke, still looking at the wall. "But doesn't he ever want to try his hand at something different?"

"Perhaps one day when the children are older . . . they really are too young at present to be taken abroad."

"Oh, I didn't mean take the children," persisted the woman. "Bob and I used to think we had to do that, but two years ago he said: 'Let's send them to Broadstairs and go to Switzerland on our own.' And when we came back we found the children had enjoyed it just as much, and we certainly had a good deal more enjoyment."

"I'm quite sure Harry and I would not enjoy a holiday without the children and they would miss us dreadfully."

She spoke stiffly, to change the subject. Mrs. Clarke did not understand.

She was not sure that she understood herself why she so deeply loved these visits to Idolsfold, why she found in them a refreshment that she felt sure she would not find in a continental trip with Harry alone. After all, she had not been born a Laurelwood. She had no lifelong associations with the place and people. Nevertheless the place and people were incommunicably dear to her. The plane trees in the London streets had scarcely put on their leaves before she was counting the days till August, thinking and dreaming of that holiday which was no holiday at all by some people's standards, involving little more than a change of scene. She lived her usual domestic life, but in very much more cramped quarters; she had her catering and her housekeeping to do just the same, except that in the mornings, instead of Cook, she interviewed Mrs. Lardner.

That was the reason, of course—the Lardners. She was no cradle Laurelwood, but, as is often the way with converts, what in them was faith in her had become fanaticism. To meet the Lardners every year, to exchange news, compare the growth of children, to

accept services that were given not only readily but joyfully—all these things had become rites which brought an ever-growing need for their observance. Every year, when she first arrived, Frances Laurelwood looked forward to her first talk with Mrs. Lardner.

It always took place in the dining room after tea. First they would all have tea, the whole family together, no separate nursery or schoolroom meals. There they sat round the white cloth smelling of soapsuds and the tea tray with its blue and white china, so pretty, yet with homely thick edges. She remembered how once Meg had said: "Mummy, there's more mug than milk in my mouth when I drink."

It made her feel proud and happy to see them all sitting round the table. She told herself they were pretty children. Diana certainly showed signs of growing up into a beauty, with all that lovely hair. Meg had nice hair too, though Nanny for practical reasons had dragged it off her face into a pigtail. Martin, of course, was at the awkward age, and could not be thought handsome; but Boy was a dear little fellow with golden curls that made her dread the day when they would have to be cropped like Martin's.

All the children had her hair and their father's eyes. She used to have lovely hair, quite fair when she was younger, but it had come out badly after Boy's birth, and had never grown back in anything like its former sheen and vigor. Her eyes were blue, but all the children's eyes were hazel; even Diana whose features otherwise resembled hers had her father's eyes. She had always thought Harry's eyes the most remarkable thing about him. With his kind of face you somehow expected them to be blue, but they were a strange gold color, with brown flecks in them, quite out of keeping with a face which even as an engaged girl she had had to acknowledge was just ordinary.

She was two years younger than Harry, and she had always thought of him as looking older, which he doubtless did when they were first married. But now, for two or three years at least, she had realized that he looked younger. He still had an unfinished, boyish look about him. Whereas she knew that she looked middle aged, with her thin, faded hair and spreading figure. Women age quicker than men, she told herself, and accepted the situation.

Tea was always rather a short meal that first day. Ahead lay the great activities of unpacking and exploring. Frances was almost equally interested in both. She loved to see the children rush off, their eyes agog, to find out exactly what had happened and what

changes had been made since their last visit. "Be sure and tell me all about it, dears, when you come back." On the other hand, she was deeply concerned in the arrangement of everybody's clothes and belongings, the toys, the tools, the books, the bats, the rackets, the workbaskets, knitting bags, writing cases and sketching materials—the whole paraphernalia of a six weeks' visit made by seven people whose ages varied from two to forty-five.

Nanny Wheeler unpacked, but Frances had to decide where everything was to be kept in the three sitting rooms and four bedrooms that made up their quarters at Idolsfold. Such decisions were mainly academic, since every year so many of the same things came back to the same places, but every year also there was something new that must be planned for and talked about.

"Where shall you keep your doll, Meg? Downstairs or in the night nursery?"

"I don't mind."

Frances smothered a small impatience. Why wasn't Meg more enthusiastic about her wonderful new doll?

"I'm really afraid, darling, you're getting spoiled. Very few little girls have dolls as lovely as yours, and a great many have no dolls at all. I expect Bess Lardner would give anything for such a toy."

"Bess has lots of toys, lovely ones, much nicer than mine."

"Don't say such things, dear."

"But she has. Last year she had a heavenly little golden horse."

"Not gold, Meg, tin—it only cost a penny."

"Well, it looked exactly like gold."

It was absurd to be so sensitive about one's children, to mind so much because they were unlike oneself. She must not let this wonderful first evening cloud over because Meg refused to be excited about her new doll. Nor must she mind when Diana refused to go out and explore, but said she wanted to finish a story she had begun to read in the train. In a few moments Mrs. Lardner would come in to clear the table, and then they would have their talk, and her heart would be comforted.

"Well, Mrs. Lardner, and how have you all been getting on since we were last here?"

"Nicely, thank you, mum. Bess has been moved up into the same class as Lily Hovenden and her teacher pinned one of her brush paintings on the board when the inspector came."

"Really! How very nice! Miss Meg is looking forward to showing her her new doll."

"She'll be unaccountable made up with it, mum, I'm sure."

"Her godmother brought it over to her from France. All its clothes are handmade and take off and on, and it shuts its eyes and says 'Mamma.'"

"Indeed, mum. It's wonderful what they can do nowadays, isn't it?"

"Have you been keeping well, Mrs. Lardner?"

"Yes, mum, thank you. I still have those twinges, but they don't amount to so much since the doctor gave me a powder for them."

"And Mr. Lardner? How has he been keeping?"

"In very good heart, I'm thankful to say, mum. Nothing the matter with him at all."

"And the farm doing well, I hope."

"Not too bad, you might say. He's bought those two fields over on the road by Boldshaves. They came up for sale in the spring and he thought it a pity to miss the chance. Not that the money was easy to find, but he hopes to get back what he spent if the hops do well this year."

"Yes, of course, I see . . . and old Mrs. Lardner, is she as wonderful as ever?"

"Oh, Granny keeps in good heart. She's uncommon made up with having you all here again."

"I'll have a talk with her soon. And how are the boys? Has Joe started courting anyone yet?"

"No, not yet, mum. He's in no hurry, you might say."

"Very wise to wait and make up his mind. Is Emmy likely to be married this year?"

"Not this year, I think, mum. But Ted's looking out for a house and then we'll know more where we are."

"Well, I always say being engaged is one of the nicest parts of being married—I mean there's nothing to worry about, it's all enjoyment. Emmy has plenty of time to settle down in, and Diana will be glad she isn't going away just yet. How are Dick and Clarence? Master Martin has just gone out to look for them."

"They'll be very pleased to have him along of them, I'm sure."

"Dick must be nearly a man now. How old is he? Seventeen?"

"Just turned eighteen, mum."

"The same age as Diana. It must be nice for your husband to have his sons growing up to help him on the farm."



"They're uncommon useful. We've only two paid hands now, Piper and Barnes. It makes a lot of difference."

"I'm sure it does. Now tell me some more news, Mrs. Lardner. Are Mr. and Mrs. Colenutt well and busy as usual?"

"Yes, mum. Mr. Colenutt's got a new curate, Mr. Brown."

"Oh, indeed. Mr. Trimborough gone? I'm sorry, for I liked him and Mrs. Trimborough. Is this new curate married?"

"Yes, mum."

"She runs the Sunday school like Mrs. Trimborough, I suppose?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that, mum. She's rather a queer lady."

"In what way?"

"Well, mum, she dresses queer, in those tight skirts and big hats. And Mrs. Boorman once saw her smoking, and they do say she's got Sir Charles Mallender after her."

"Sir Charles Mallender! It can't be true."

"But they do say it, and they say too that he isn't the only one."

"How dreadful! But what does Mr. Colenutt think about it all? What is he doing? Surely he'd never keep a curate whose wife behaved like that."

"Oh, I reckon he don't know nothing about it, mum. He doesn't know about half what goes on in the parish."

"Well, I think it's all quite shocking and I hope Mr. Brown won't call on us here. If he does, Mr. Laurelwood will have to return the call without involving me."

"Mr. Brown ain't likely to call. Generally speaking, he don't call on anyone. He's queer too."

"Oh, what a pity."

So it went on, not a very distinguished conversation, but giving her all that her heart needed of kindly deference and homely scandal. And there, much dearer even than her talk, stood Mrs. Lardner, her hands folded over her starched apron, her round, familiar brooch gleaming at her collar, her cheeks and eyes bright too under the warm mass of her hair. Mrs. Lardner did her good, like the fresh air and sunshine of which she seemed mysteriously a part.

This year, too, she had told some outstandingly sensational news, shocking news, perhaps, she ought to say. For indeed it was shocking that a curate's wife should have no morals and involve in talk, if nothing worse, so highly placed a personality as Sir Charles Mallender.

She said nothing about it to Harry till they had gone to bed. Not only did she have no chance of private talk with him earlier—and such a revelation of wickedness in high places could not be made otherwise—but early in her married life she had formed the habit of starting a conversation directly her husband was in bed. The purpose for which she was half aware she had formed it no longer existed, for of course now they were both too old for such things; but it was still a habit and few nights passed without her indulging in it.

So tonight his head had not been long on the pillow before he had heard all about Sir Charles Mallender and the new curate's wife. She ended her story with a question: "Do you think we ought to go to tea at Morphew Hall this year?"

"Why ever not?"

Really, he was being rather stupid.

"Because of Mrs. Brown, of course."

"But I don't see what difference that makes, even if it's true."

"Oh, Harry, how can you say such things? We might meet her there."

"My dear, depend upon it, if it's true, she's the last person you're likely to meet there, and if it isn't I don't see that you need mind meeting her."

"But I gathered from Mrs. Lardner that she's undesirable in other ways."

To her indignation, she heard him laugh.

"What gossips you and Mrs. Lardner are! Putting your heads together and tearing a poor woman to pieces."

"We didn't tear her to pieces. It was only that Mrs. Lardner told me there was a new curate and I asked her if his wife was as nice as Mrs. Trimborough. It's all very well for you to laugh at me, Harry, but Diana's nearly grown up and I can't help being particular who she meets."

"I see your point, darling. I'm not asking you to meet Mrs. Brown, but I don't want you to get nervous about it either. The Mallenders are old friends and it would look very odd if we didn't go to see them. Besides, Lady Mallender's sure to call."

"I don't know. The whole neighborhood may be cutting them, if it's true."

Harry laughed again.

"I don't think that's in the least likely."

"Oh, well . . . I hope it isn't—I mean, they're people I don't want

to stop knowing. What I want to say is, if he's all right, they're very good people to know. . . Oh, Harry, *do stop laughing.*"

No doubt one reason why she so much enjoyed her talks with Mrs. Lardner was that they never came anywhere near the secrets at the bottom of her heart. There could never be any question of her taking into her confidence a woman so comfortingly different from herself in speech and ways and class. Mrs. Lardner would not expect it. She would be embarrassed. And never would she, on her side, think of making confidences. One was safe on the surface of life, in a sort of little conversational boat that glided over still waters which might run deep but had no power to rock the craft.

They talked of people they scarcely knew and events they had only heard of. They discussed the outer lives of their children, growth, illnesses, examinations, games, clothes, quaint sayings. Their husbands stood in the background as authorities. "Mr. Laurelwood thinks" . . . "Mr. Lardner says . . ." But what she liked most was the feeling of absolute security, the knowledge that the conversation would never lead to anything more than this. Sometimes at home in London a conversation would begin in the same way and then take a sudden plunge into the deeps. She remembered occasions when friends had upset her with sad, sorry tales about their private lives. Tears had been shed in her drawing room; and she would never forget how a cosy chat with Mrs. Leadbitter had ended up in painful confidences about her husband and the unforgivable statement that all men were the same.

"I don't believe that. I'm sure Harry would never, never, be disloyal to me."

"My dear, I tell you they're none of them to be trusted."

How very unpleasant . . . No wonder she found comfort in the thought that Mr. Lardner might do anything save actually run away—not that he wasn't as good and well behaved as Harry in his different fashion—and Mrs. Lardner would never mention it. It was the same with the children. If they ever gave her any trouble—and Frances would allow that children, unlike husbands, must be acknowledged sometimes to be naughty—she never spoke of it. All she would speak of was Bess's progress at school, Clarence's usefulness on the farm, Emmy's industrious preparation for her wedding, Dick's neat and tidy ways, Joe's fine voice in the choir. Which Frances would match with Boy's advance in articulation,

Meg's performance at the dancing class, Martin's high marks in the Cambridge preliminary and Diana's success at her first ball.

Artlessly they bragged about their children: "Really, mum, that time he had the solo at the harvest Thanksgiving Mr. Trimborough said it was like listening to an angel" . . . "He can pronounce some words of three syllables. The doctor says it's most remarkable at his age" . . . "Mr. Lardner said he'd sooner trust him than Piper with the lambs for market" . . . "She can get right up on her toes like a ballet dancer" . . . "I must get her to show you the petticoats she's made, all sewn with feather stitch" . . . "Oh, Mrs. Lardner, she really looked sweet. Her dress was of white satin covered with little pearls like dewdrops and trimmed with lace and baby ribbon."

Sometimes they would have a sort of return match in which Frances would praise Bess's manners: "Such a nice, quiet, well-behaved little girl. I'm always glad to have her play with Meg." Or Dick's appearance: "He's really *very* good-looking. He'll be breaking somebody's heart soon." And Mrs. Lardner would say how useful Mr. Lardner found Master Martin on the farm, and how tall Miss Meg had grown: "And really, mum, Miss Diana's beautiful. I never saw such hair, and how clever she does it, too!"

It was all comforting. When she talked to Mrs. Lardner she could forget the clouds that sometimes, when she was alone, she saw hanging over this latest and should-be-loveliest holiday at Idolsfold.

Those clouds had risen out of the minds of her husband and children. With regard to the children, she was always telling herself how silly she was to feel hurt by their being so different from what she used to be at their age; but she could not help it. She could not help minding that Meg seemed to care so little about her new doll, and had to be goaded to take it out with her to tea at the Colenutts or the Mallenders. Its loveliness, its expensiveness, the exquisiteness of its clothes, and the goodness of her godmother in bringing it all the way from Paris for her delight made no impact on her mind whatsoever.

Then Diana upset her too, in a different and far more painful way. Diana seemed actually dissatisfied with Idolsfold. She openly complained of having to go there every year instead of to the Continent or to Scotland. Her great friend Pamela French had gone to Scotland that year and it had turned her head. Frances tried hard to reason with her patiently, to convince her how much nicer and

happier it was to go away every year like this to a beloved place, than to venture into unknown discomfort and unfriendliness. But Diana had refused to be convinced. She had sulked. She had argued. She had even said that her father had told her he would like to go to Switzerland. Then to crown all she had declared flatly that she would not come to Idolsfold after she was married, that she would not bring her children there and carry on the relationship of the Lardners and the Laurelwoods into a fourth generation.

Of course she was too young to know what she was talking about, and even if she did not bring her children there would be Martin and Meg to bring theirs and carry on the tradition; but Frances felt disheartened nonetheless. Diana was getting spoiled. Her success at balls and parties had unfitted her for simple pleasures and homely people. It was very sad indeed.

The trouble with Martin was of a different nature, and had its origin in her husband rather than her son. She found that Harry objected to Martin's constant association with the Lardner boys, to the hours he spent in their company on the farm. Of source she herself often had to find fault with his grubby hands and untidy clothes, but apart from that it had pleased her to think that he was playing and working with Dick and Clarence, on the same happy terms with them as she herself was with their mother.

"Oh, Harry," she said when he spoke his disapproval, "I don't think it does him any harm. It's nice for him to be so interested in the farm and so friendly with the Lardner boys."

"I don't mind his being interested and friendly. We're all that. But it seems to me that his interest approaches infatuation. He can talk of nothing but farming—crops and stock and prices, just like a yokel. He didn't want to come to tea with us at the vicarage last Tuesday because there was something going on here about a new cow. I have a feeling that if we aren't careful he may want to be a farmer himself when he grows up."

"Oh, Harry, no! How ridiculous!"

"Not ridiculous at all. A great many people become farmers."

"But not people like us."

"Yes, dear, people like us. I've known more than one professional man's son decide to be a farmer. It's generally overseas, but a few have set up for themselves in this country and not done too well on the whole. Besides, we've always hoped Martin would go into the firm."

"Yes, of course, and I know he means to." He had never told her

but she knew it. "He'd never dream of being a farmer—not seriously. It's just a part of his holiday."

"I'm not so sure of that. He as good as told me the other day that he'd *like* to be a farmer. Even if he has no precise plans at the moment you can see his mind's full of it."

"I'm sure it's only because of Dick and Clarence."

"No doubt it's something to do with them, and that's one reason why I think it would be a good thing if they weren't so much together. Apart from that, I should have thought you'd be the first to see that Dick and Clarence Lardner aren't really suitable as intimate friends for your son."

She had been really startled.

"Oh, Harry! Intimate friends? Of course they're not."

"What are they, then?"

"They're like-like Bess is to Meg, or Emmy to Diana, or in fact Mrs. Lardner to me. I'm sure they always remember their place and keep their distance."

He had looked at her as if he were puzzled. Then he said: "Like Bess is to Meg, I'll grant you. But I'd be very surprised if Diana ever let herself be on such terms with Emmy, and I'm sure it's nothing like you and Mrs. Lardner."

"You mean they're not respectful?"

Again he looked puzzled, but this time before he spoke he laughed.

"Respectful! Of course not. Are children ever respectful to one another?"

"Dick and Clarence are not children."

"No, but they're young; and they'd never go about all day with a boy of their own age if they had to be respectful to him. If they had to do that they'd keep their distance in other ways besides in their behavior. No, you can take it from me that they treat Martin just as they treat Jass or Georgie Hovenden or any other boy of their own sort."

"I'll never believe that."

She was annoyed with him for what he had said. He had upset her, just as he had upset her when he told Diana that he would like to go to Switzerland for his holidays. She had had that out with him, and he had explained that of course he had never meant to be taken literally; he had been thinking vaguely of some possible future occasion. She tried to make him explain himself away this time, but it had not been so easy, though he had agreed with her in the end.

Then, most disconcertingly, he was proved right—in general, that is, for the proof did not come through Martin but through Meg. That charming relationship with Bess which had flourished so prettily in her mind suddenly revealed itself as something of a very different order. Bess was found in possession of Meg's beautiful French doll. At first it was thought that she had stolen it, and Frances, though shocked and shaken, was not without compassion for the thief. Poor little girl! How she must have coveted that beautiful, expensive toy. It was easy to understand the temptation, and her yielding to it might lead to a better realization on the part of Meg of her exceptional privileges. The crime took on a very different complexion when it was found that Meg herself was an accessory both before and after the fact, and had bartered her priceless possession for a twopenny tin watch bought by Bess at the village store. Not only had she done so, but throughout the arraignment had persisted in declaring that she had the best of the bargain.

Frances was horrified, but the worst had not happened yet. Her world seemed turned inside out when she saw a Lardner and a Laurelwood engaged in personal combat, thumping and kicking and scratching each other before her stricken eyes. Meg indeed had started the fight, but in Bess's counterattack there was no more deference than delay. The combatants had been separated and Mrs. Lardner had most suitably wept over the outrage. But irreparable damage had been done to the Lardner-Laurelwood relationship, on the very morrow, too, of that harvest festival which year by year proclaimed that relationship and established it on an even surer foundation.

Seated round the tablecloth spread on the stubble the two families had met in the perspective of two parallel lines, apparently converging yet eternally apart. Now the two lines had broken and crossed like swords. The happy state in which friendship was flanked on one side by prestige and on the other side by respect evidently did not exist among the junior members of the families. She could now believe that Harry was right about Martin and that his association with Dick and Clarence was not inevitably that of the young master with his admiring inferiors.

Harry was very magnanimous about Meg and Bess. He never said "I told you so," and he approved without comment of her plans for controlling their future relations. But somehow, beyond that he was not quite his old satisfactory, satisfied self that year.

Not only was she unable fully to accept his explanation of his remark to Diana about Switzerland, but he seemed, as she expressed it, to have "got his horns out" over his painting.

Hitherto, every year, he had painted during the summer holidays. His setting out with his easel and paintbox was an accepted part of the beloved routine of Idolsfold; and every year her drawing-room walls made room for some new celebration of the roofs of Copstreet beyond Clearhedge Wood, Rushmonden spire as seen from Four Went Ways, the disused mill wheel at Witsunden, or the blue hills of Sussex beyond the floods of the Oldwatering.

But this year, for the first time, he attempted figure painting, and his effort had been of a disconcerting kind. He had not painted a picture of Diana, though, according to everybody she was pretty enough to paint; nor had he made, as he so easily might, a pleasant little sketch of Bess Lardner in her blue dress and white pinafore, or of Dick and Joe at work thatching the cornstacks. No, he had deliberately set out to sketch from memory a woman he had seen only once and she had never seen at all and did not want to see.

He had shown her the sketch of Pigeon Hoo he had made that first morning, when he had gone out with Diana. But he had not shown her the sketch he made a few days later of the same place. It had been a wet day, and he could not paint out of doors, so he had gone upstairs to work in the bedroom. It always annoyed her when he did this; she could not understand why he could not work in the sitting room while she was writing letters. It wasn't as if the children were there too—only herself and possibly Diana. After all, when he sketched out of doors there were often people about, and sometimes they looked over his shoulder, yet he did not seem to mind. Why should he want to be alone when he worked in the house?

All this had made her vaguely resentful, and she had had to fight a battle with herself to be magnanimous and ask him afterward how he had got on.

"Not too well, I'm afraid," he had answered. "I made one or two attempts from memory, but it's difficulty to work without the model."

She had not been surprised, therefore, that he did not show her what he had done. He generally liked to keep his failures to himself. The surprise came a fortnight later, on another rainy day, when idly turning over his sketches she had found one of Pigeon Hoo



with the full-length figure of a woman standing in the foreground.

"Who's that, Harry?"

"What!" he looked startled. "Oh, that's the sketch of Pigeon Hoo I did from memory. It isn't very good."

"But who's that standing in front?"

A perceptible pause.

"That's a lady Diana and I saw there when we went over."

"Oh, really . . . you never told me. Who is she?"

"The new curate's wife at Copstreet, Mrs. Brown."

"Oh."

"I didn't know who she was at the time, but afterward I gathered from things I heard said—"

"Why didn't you tell me? You might have known I'd be interested."

"I've already told you that I didn't know who she was."

"But I'd have been interested to know you'd met *anybody* . . . and afterward, when you'd guessed who she was . . . But never mind. Did you speak to her at all?"

"Oh, yes, she came up and looked at my work and made certain suggestions."

"As to how you should do it? What cheek!"

"I don't think it was cheek. She's lived among artists and knows a lot about art."

"All the same I think it was cheek to make suggestions to a man of your age and experience."

"Oh, people often make suggestions. There's nothing new in that. The only novelty was that some of hers were extremely helpful. That touch of red, for instance, it simply makes the picture."

"If you ask me, it spoils it."

The sharpness of her own voice startled her. She had not realized till then how much she was upset. But it was so unlike Harry to keep a thing like that to himself. Even if he had not thought it worth recording at the time, he might have told her about it as soon as he had guessed who the woman was. Instead of which he had gone up to his bedroom and painted her picture from memory. She did not like it, but at the same time it became necessary to find another reason for her dislike.

"Did Diana meet her too?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, Diana was there."

"Well, she's not at all the sort of person I want Diana to meet. Really, Harry, if you take her out you ought to be more careful."

"I've told you, my dear, that I hadn't the faintest idea who the lady was. And it can't have done Diana any harm to exchange a few words with her. There was nothing in the way of a formal meeting."

"That's a mercy. I don't want Diana to have to recognize her if she happens to run across her anywhere. I gather we're not likely to meet her at the Colenutts', but the Mallenders are sure to invite her to their garden party, since they invite everybody. Unless, of course . . . well, anyhow it doesn't matter, since there was no introduction. If you see her there or anywhere else it won't be necessary for either of you to notice her."

Having settled that, it was annoying to have Mrs. Benson, the bank manager's wife, come up to her at the garden party and after some obviously hurried greetings remark, "Your husband seems to be getting on very well with Mrs. Brown."

"Oh, is he? I hadn't noticed."

But Frances knew that she had flushed.

"What do you think of our new curate's wife?"

"I haven't met her. But she met my husband once when he was sketching, and made some very useful suggestions, I believe."

"No doubt they're having a chat on art."

"No doubt."

Odious woman! Why can't I think of something to say that will put her in her place? Some of her annoyance must have shown itself on her face, for Mrs. Benson said: "You mustn't mind what I said, Mrs. Laurelwood."

"Why should I mind?"

"No reason, really. But I thought you did."

"But what could I possibly mind? There's nothing to mind in my husband having a talk on art with Mrs. Brown, even though I don't happen personally to have met her."

"Oh, no, of course not, and she must know a lot about art. She used to be an artist's model."

Frances felt too angry to continue the conversation, but she could not walk away at this point, and it was not till the situation had been broken down by some random remarks about Harry's sketches which inconsequently led to Mrs. Benson's desire for an ice, that the two ladies separated in a state of mutual contempt.

As soon as Mrs. Benson was out of sight, Frances walked off in search of Harry. She had left him on the lawn below the terrace,

and Diana had been there too. Had Diana seen him talking to Mrs. Brown? If so, it was very wrong of him, after all she had said . . . But Diana had disappeared. Gaily dressed groups stood like bunches of flowers on the green grass. There were the Colenutts talking to the rector of Shadoxhurst and his wife, and there were Kitty and Dolly Mallender, looking tremendously smart and knowing with a group of laughing young men whom she suspected of being in the peerage. Everywhere stood clumps and knots of people. And in the midst of them one couple stood alone.

To Frances' shamed eyes there seemed to be a doubly wide space between them and the nearest bunch. They looked isolated— isolated and conspicuous. That red dress . . . how anyone could wear it . . . and that hat and boa . . . she must have put them on with the deliberate purpose of attracting attention. How could Harry be so simple?

There he stood, talking and laughing as if he had known her all his life. They were rather too far off for Frances to be able to study her face in detail, to see if she was really pretty. From the distance she did not look so, not nearly as pretty as Diana. Every now and then there was a flash of white teeth and, so Frances thought, a roll of black eyes. She was full of animation and so was he; she knew him well enough to tell even from where she stood that he looked almost excited. How long had this been going on? It must be fully ten minutes since Mrs. Benson had told her about them, and she might not have seen the beginning of the conversation. Should she go and interrupt them? Call Harry away and ask him to fetch her an ice? No, she could not do that. She did not know the woman and did not want to know her. But it would look odd for her to be standing there alone, watching her husband flirting with Mrs. Brown. She would go and talk to the Colenutts.

So she joined the clerical group; but though she talked she did not listen. All her attention was for that solitary pair whom she could still see out of the corner of her eye. How long would they stand there? All the afternoon, perhaps; for it was not likely that anyone would go near them to break up their tête-à-tête. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Colenutt, I didn't hear."

At last, however, the tension was relieved: though not too comfortably, for it involved a meeting she would have liked to avoid. Mr. Brown came sauntering by, and Mr. Colenutt hailed him.

"Brown, you haven't forgotten evensong, have you? I'm relying on you."

Evensong was read at the parish church every day at half-past five.

"No, I haven't forgotten. I'm going as soon as ever I can detach Daisy from whoever she's got hold of now."

What an extraordinary way for a clergyman to talk. She wanted to say "That's my husband," but feared it might lead to her having to meet his wife. Mrs. Colenutt evidently thought some explanation was needed and made things worse by saying: "Oh, that's Mr. Laurelwood, an old friend of ours. Mrs. Laurelwood, have you never met Mr. Brown?"

Frances never had and did not want to, but she could not refuse to shake hands. After all, Mr. Brown was a clergyman, though a very odd-looking one, and an introduction to him need not involve her with his wife.

"I have a daughter here too," she said wildly. "I must go and find her," and walked off in the direction of the rose garden.

Her departure was not entirely due to her dislike of Mr. Brown. She did not want to be there when he interrupted his wife's conversation with her husband. She did not want to have to speak to Harry just yet, she felt too angry. She would rather wait till the angry mood had passed. She would have to speak to him some time, but if she spoke now she might say something she would afterward regret.

The mood passed more quickly than might have been expected. Lady Mallender was in the rose garden with some other guests and deliberately came up to tell her how pretty she thought Diana. Sir Charles had made remarks to the same effect when he was greeting them as their host, but not only was he himself suspect but she was afraid that his admiration might turn Diana's head; so she had hurried her away and the episode out of her mind. Now she might wallow to her heart's content.

"So good of you to say so, Lady Mallender. Yes, she *is* a pretty girl, though I'm glad to say she doesn't know it yet."

"She'll know soon enough," said Lady Mallender.

"I suppose she will. But I want to keep her fresh and unspoiled as long as possible."

Lady Mallender introduced her friends, one of whom was another ladyship, and they all talked very amiably and vacantly till some other guests came up to say good-by. Frances then thought she ought to collect her scattered family. Diana had reappeared on the terrace lawn, where Harry was now talking to the Colenutts, and

Frances felt calm enough to send him in search of Nanny and the children, who had spent the afternoon with the little Mallenders and some other children in the paddock.

Soon all the Laurelwoods were jogging home behind Dick Lardner and the Idolsford mare—rather a heavy load for one horse, Frances thought, but Mr. Lardner said Princess would hardly notice it after bringing in the corn. All the children were laughing and talking and recounting their adventures, just in the way their mother liked; by the time they reached the farm she was in such a happy mood that she felt her talk with Harry about Mrs. Brown might well wait till bedtime.

She would not postpone it beyond then, however. The matter, though distasteful, must be settled or it would spoil the next day. But she would not let herself be angry with him again.

"Harry dear," she began mildly, as soon as the candle was blown out, "I really don't think it was necessary for you to have such a very long talk with Mrs. Brown this afternoon."

"It wasn't very long."

"It must have been at least a quarter of an hour. And people were talking, you know."

"Talking? Of course they were. Why not?"

"I mean talking about you and Mrs. Brown. They thought it very odd you should be so friendly with her."

She heard him draw in his breath.

"What nonsense! I never heard such outrageous rubbish. Surely I'm free to talk to whom I like at a garden party."

"Well, Mrs. Brown is in rather an exceptional position."

"I don't see that. She was a guest of the Mallenders, just as we were."

"I mean she's a center of gossip, and you must remember, Harry, that you've got a young daughter just on the threshold of life. Lady Mallender was speaking to me about her only this afternoon and saying how good looking she is. I don't want to spoil her chances."

"How on earth can my talking to Mrs. Brown spoil her chances?"

"Well, it associates her with an undesirable character. Lady Mallender might think—"

"My dear Fan, Lady Mallender invited Mrs. Brown to her garden party, so I cannot see how she can possibly object to her other guests talking to her. In fact, it would be far more discourteous to Lady Mallender if they didn't."

I don't suppose any of them did, but you, thought Frances. Aloud she said: "Considering you don't know her, it was really going out of your way to talk to her like that."

"I've told you that I met her at Pigeon Hoo, so when I saw her at the Mallenders I couldn't ignore her."

"You could have avoided her."

"Why should I?"

Frances could have cried. She had never known him so perverse.

"Oh, Harry, don't you see? She's an undesirable acquaintance."

She could not understand what was making her use all those pompous phrases: exceptional position, center of gossip, threshold of life, undesirable character, and now undesirable acquaintance. They seemed to rise up as out of a trap and all to have capital letters. She hoped Harry had not noticed them. But he had.

"Really, Fan, you've drugged yourself with words till you've come to think they mean something. Mrs. Brown may be an Undesirable Acquaintance or a Center of Gossip or anything else you like, but it makes no difference to me. I'm not asking you to know her, nor do I intend to introduce Diana. But personally I find her interesting. She knows a lot about art, and that's a subject which, you may imagine, interests me very much, but which I hardly ever get a chance to talk about."

"You could always talk to me. I'm sure I'd be glad enough if you sometimes did."

He was silent a moment, then he said:

"I know, dear, but it wouldn't be the same thing. She's an expert—or rather, perhaps I should say, she's known experts and seen them at work."

Frances wanted to say: "Undoubtedly—she was the model," but controlled herself.

"I don't pretend to be a genius," continued Harry, "but I'm keen on those things, and I think I could do better than I am doing if I had some advice and help."

Frances felt a new, strange qualm. Never in her life had she felt anything like it. She had trusted Harry as instinctively and implicitly with other women as she had trusted herself with other men. But now something in her heart said, "She's got hold of him."

"Yes, darling," she began nervously "I quite see that she was able to give you some suggestions, some hints, but that doesn't make her a desirable—I mean, you had a talk with her at the garden party, but you won't be seeing her again. You can't very well meet her again, considering I can't possibly know her."

"I don't at all see why you can't know her, but if you don't choose to it's your own affair. I shan't ask you to."

"You can't know her if I don't."

"I don't know her."

"I mean meet her, talk to her."

"If I meet her I shall certainly talk to her."

"But where would you meet her?"

"Nowhere," he said impatiently, "and do let's stop discussing her now. I want to go to sleep."

To her surprise he did so almost at once, but she lay awake till the dawn was fingering the edge of the blind. Her mind and heart were in a turmoil. Harry, for the first time in their married life, was obstinately displeasing her, and—which seemed incredible—on account of another woman. He must be infatuated, not in any wicked or really disloyal sense, she hastened to assure herself, but to the extent of making things extremely awkward and herself unhappy. It is true that he had not definitely said he would meet Mrs. Brown again, in fact he did not seem to expect it, but neither had he said that he wouldn't. Some time when he was out sketching . . . she stifled a moan in the pillow.

Harry's sketching had always been one of his most cherished activities—cherished by her as well as by him. It had always made her so happy to see him go out with his easel and paintbox and to welcome him home with the picture he had made of some beloved place—really he could not say that she failed to appreciate his art. But now she would watch him start out with anxiety and welcome him back with suspicion. That woman would be sure to make an opportunity to meet him while he was at work. That was her way of getting hold of him, and he, poor simple Harry, was letting himself be an easy prey. It was all unspeakably horrible. She even found herself taking comfort in the thought that they had little more than another fortnight left at Idolsfold. How terrible, that she should actually want . . . Her holiday was spoiled.

Deep in the pillow was the sweet smell of lavender and the salt taste of tears, taking her back to that other night, now nearly twenty years ago, when she had wept with her face hidden in a sweet smell and a bitter taste. That had been on Harry's account too, but the bride of those days seemed a stranger now, disappointed in Harry because she was disappointed in marriage—or was it the other way round? Her marriage had been a success, in spite of that night. She had four lovely children and a devoted husband. For

Harry *was* devoted to her, nothing could alter that—not that woman. It was only his head that was turned, not his heart. They would go home to London and forget all about her, both of them. But that was the dreadful part, that looking forward, that fixing her hope on the return to London, which she always used to dread. Oh, Idolsfold!

She feared that her sobs would wake him, but he did not wake. He slept on peacefully unaware that he had spoiled Idolsfold for her, just as he had slept on unaware that he had spoiled her marriage . . . No, no, what nonsense! She was letting her misery run away with her. Her marriage had never been spoiled, nor was Idolsfold; only clouded for a moment. The clouds would roll away, and she would forget, as she had forgotten before.

A faint luminosity hung in the window, and far away she heard a cock crow. It was more like the ghost of a crow than a real one, but she welcomed it in her heart for it brought the morning. It also brought other mornings, when she had lain in drowsy happiness, only just aware that she was at Idolsfold because of the voices of the cocks crowing in her sleep. The far-off cry was answered by others nearer—they welcomed the dawn at Plurenden, at Wagstaff, at Haffenden, at Clearhelge, at Boldshaves, and now the Idolsfold rooster was awake, answering the other farms. As he woke she slept.

When the day really began, with Emmy Lardner's footsteps in the room, and the rustle and snap of the blind, she woke feeling some way on the road to comfort. That comfort would be complete, she told herself, when she had had a good talk with Mrs. Lardner. Not that she would dream of discussing Harry's failings. They belonged to a world which simply did not exist when she sat in the wicker armchair and Mrs. Lardner stood before her with her hands folded over her apron. But Mrs. Brown's failings were another story, and it would be an infinite refreshment to see them again through Mrs. Lardner's eyes.

In that innocent light they would cease to be a personal danger. They would appear as just another item of local gossip, of no more concern to her personally than Mrs. Trumper's difficulty in obtaining servants or Mr. and Mrs. Benson's recent holiday in Devonshire. Above all, Mrs. Lardner would soothe away this strange, new uneasiness which had made her even afraid of Idolsfold. She felt like a child who has fallen down and frightened herself, and Mrs. Lardner was the nurse who would pick her up and dust her and tell her she wasn't hurt.



The conversation when it took place after breakfast, did not bring much that was soothing in its opening exchanges. Frances mentioned Mrs. Brown almost at once—it had been easy, since she was giving an account of the garden party—and Mrs. Lardner said: "I'm surprised at her being there, mum. They do say Sir Charles Mallender's got shut of her."

"Oh."

"Couldn't put up with her goings on with other men. Howsomever, she may have gone there for appearances."

"Mr. Laurelwood said that if she was there we could take for granted there was nothing in it."

"There was something in it for certain sure. I've heard too much . . . and everyone knows they were in London together for a week last month."

"Oh, were they? How very dreadful. I wonder how much her husband knows."

Mrs. Lardner shook her head.

"He's another queer one."

"And Mr. Colenutt . . . really, I don't think he ought to keep Mr. Brown as his curate. I mean even if there's nothing in it, all this gossip must be bad for the church."

"No doubt of it, mum. But seemingly you can't get shut of a curate as easy as you can of a servant girl; and Mr. Brown's a good clergyman in his way. There was a sermon he preached in the spring that I'll never forget."

"What was it about?"

"I couldn't tell you that, mum. But the way he shouted and waved his arms, it was as good as going to the fair. Everyone was properly made up with him."

"Well, I still don't think . . . you say Sir Charles Mallender was shocked at her goings on. Surely if she was his—I mean if she was on *those* terms with him, she wouldn't have been on with anyone else."

"Oh, she'd be on with anybody, mum, who'd give her half a chance."

"But I can't understand. She's so cheap, so vulgar. Surely no gentleman, nobody used to the society of well-bred women . . . I know Sir Charles Mallender did, but he's a *racing* man."

"Well, mum, it isn't likely as any *real* gentleman, like Mr. Laurelwood, would look at her. But I'm afraid there's plenty others, and she's not particular by all accounts."

Frances shuddered, but no longer in fear for Harry. As she had hoped, her emotions had been translated from her own concerns into another world, and her distaste for Mrs. Brown's goings on was now nearly as impersonal as Mrs. Lardner's. With Mrs. Lardner she sat in judgment on a world to which she did not belong.

"She must have been very badly brought up as a child. Have you any idea who her people were?"

"They do say her father was an army colonel, but I'll never believe it."

"Nor will I. I don't suppose she's a lady at all, just a tradesman's daughter who drifted into artistic circles and then saw a chance of marrying above them."

"Yes, mum, I see that, mum; and they do say . . ."

This was the true Idolsfold, and Mrs. Lardner might have shaken her fears out of the window with the breakfast crumbs, so little did they disturb her for the rest of the day. Harry set out on his bicycle for Sissinghurst, to sketch the castle towers, but as both Diana and Martin went with him—the latter most unwillingly—she could have no qualms. His insistence on taking Martin seemed not merely another move in his campaign to detach him from the Lardner boys but a definite assurance to her that he had not the smallest expectation of meeting Mrs. Brown. He went out as a father, a family man, the man she loved . . . When he came back she made a point of asking to see his work and giving him all the interest and admiration that he obviously needed.

"Really, dear, I think it's beautiful, quite the best thing you've done."

"I'm not so sure. I haven't got the texture right; the towers look too much as if they were a part of the wood."

"But anyone can see that it's Sissinghurst Castle rising beyond the trees. You've got those two towers exactly, with their funny little tops. Nobody could think they were a part of the wood."

He shook his head but said no more.

After that she set herself to look forward to the holiday's yearly climax in the trip to Folkestone. Her anxiety about Harry was to be pushed right out of her daylight hours. She could not help it if sometimes at night she woke with its clutch at her heart, or if a big hat nodded in her dreams. But at least she could prevent its spoiling her days, these last days at Idolsfold, which must be counted only in sorrow.

The trip to Folkestone, too, this year had some new aspects to crowd her thoughts. There was her decision not to take Bess Lardner and Diana's invitation to tea with Kitty Mallender at the Grand Hotel. Of these two variations the second only was pleasing, though it seemed odd that two girls should have tea together at a hotel and not at a teashop, and she hoped Diana would not pick up any more upsetting notions from friends richer than herself. The decision not to take Bess had been a real act of self-denial on her part, but Harry agreed with her that it was inevitable and that Mrs. Lardner could not possibly expect anything else. Bess had not only been a very naughty girl but had shown herself a bad influence. Meg's reactions she could not guess. For though they had not once played together since the day of the quarrel, you never could tell with children, and in spite of pulled hair and punched noses they might long for each other's company. However, when the day came, Meg left the house in nearly as high spirits as Diana, which was saying much.

As far back as Frances could remember the day of the Folkestone expedition had been fine, and this year there was no departure from tradition on the part of the weather. The sun shone with just the right amount of heat, enough to make everyone say "How nice it will be by the sea," but not enough to make anyone dread the journey in the darling little train. Frances' spirits soared as they took their seats, all in the same carriage and a carriage to themselves. There they sat, her family of which she was so fond and so proud—Harry, her dear husband, full of fun and spirits, making jokes at which they all laughed again and again, Diana looking so very pretty and grown up (dear child) in her linen coat and skirt and Panama hat, Meg looking like the good little girl she really was, Martin, for once, full of plans for enjoying himself without the Lardner boys, and her own baby prattling away on Nanny's lap. To crown all, Mrs. Lardner had seemed quite to understand about Bess not coming with them. Rather against Harry's advice she had spoken to her about it and she had said, "Of course, mum; I see, mum. You couldn't possibly take her with you after *that*."

At Folkestone there was a small setback. It was only a small one, because neither she nor Harry could pretend to be really fond of Aunt Eleanor or to mind being dismissed from her doorstep on the grounds that she did not feel well enough to see them. But they both felt that she might have let them know beforehand since, according

to her elderly parlormaid, she had been unwell for some days, and saved them the drag up to Cheriton Road. Also Smithers might have asked them to come in, or indeed offered some refreshment, as she knew they had been traveling since eight in the morning. They were feeling a little ruffled by the time they rejoined the main party on the beach.

"Well, never mind," said Harry, "this'll give me some extra time for sketching." Frances savored the comfort of knowing that here in Folkestone she need have no fear of Mrs. Brown. For two or three days after the expedition to Sissinghurst she had loyally smothered her apprehensions when he went out with his easel or sketchbook. But she could not help thinking it ominous that he did not take Martin or Diana with him a second time. It is true that Martin had passionately disliked going, and ever since had managed to disappear when he saw his father preparing to start. But Diana would have been ready enough to go, and she herself had offered once—offered and been rejected. "You know it always bores you, dear," which was true, but she would have to put up with boredom to feel safe.

Now she felt safe and could enjoy herself as she pleased with Nanny Wheeler and the children. "I shall have tea with you all at the Creamery. Will you join us, Harry?"

"Well, I'll see how I get on. You've given me such a wonderful lunch that I don't think I shall want any tea; and if I find I'm really getting some work done—"

"Oh, of course, dear. Come if you feel inclined. If not we'll meet you at the station."

"That'll be it. I'll come along to the station if I don't join you before that."

"What are you going to paint?"

"I thought of going up on the Leas and getting a view of the harbor. You can see France today; I'd like to have a shot at that."

He seemed cheerful and contented, and she watched him go with cheerfulness and contentment in her own heart.

The rest of the afternoon passed comfortably. Diana, unusually obliging, took Meg to buy a substitute for the watch she had destroyed by throwing it at the owner's head. This act of reparation had been considered necessary by both her parents, but Frances was relieved not to have to supervise its performance. It was nice to sit instead on the beach and talk to Nanny while Boy pretended

to make sand puddings with his tiny spade and pail. Talking to Nanny was only a few degrees less comforting than talking to Mrs. Lardner. With her too she experienced that relief from pretense and strain which accompanied an escape out of her own class. The difference lay in the fact that Nanny was considerably more intimate with her than Mrs. Lardner. The millstream of her conversation purposefully turned the wheel of family life instead of flowing past like a prattling meadow rill. She could also be rude on occasion, but never irretrievably so. "It's her age," Frances would say to herself while her tongue still smarted with the rebuke she had been forced to administer.

Nanny was forty-five. She had come to them eighteen years ago when Diana was a month old, and Diana, Frances suspected, had remained throughout the years her favorite child.

"Pretty as paint she is," she remarked complacently when, having brought back Meg, the eldest of the family set out on her own devices.

"She certainly knows how to wear her clothes." How daintily Diana was holding up her skirt over the fullness of her petticoat. And she twirled her parasol upon her shoulder in a way that Frances could never manage.

"She'll be getting married before long," continued Nanny.

"I hope not for some time yet. She's only eighteen."

"That's old enough—to get engaged, anyhow. And if I'm not mistaken, she's met him."

"Oh, Nanny—who?"

"That nice Mr. French, Miss Pamela's brother."

"What! Bertie French?"

"That's him, ma'am. I've been wondering for some time if they wouldn't make a match of it, and I felt nearly sure of it after that last ball before we came down. She's kept the program."

"How do you know?"

"I saw it when I was tidying her drawers the other day. She'd got it among her handkerchiefs. Fancy her bringing it down here with her. She's a case, all right."

"I daresay she only kept it as a souvenir of a delightful ball. She had a great many partners besides Mr. French."

"There was his name written all over it, as I saw with my own eyes. His initials, rather. Oh, he's the man."

"Well, it would be very nice if they fell in love some day. But I don't want her to start thinking of these things just yet."

"You've often told me, ma'am, that you were only nineteen when you got engaged to Mr. Laurelwood."

"Ah, but I was quite a different sort of girl from Diana, much older for my age."

"Then you'd changed by the time she was born, for I tell you she's older now than I found you then."

Frances took this as one of Nanny's rudnesses and made no reply.

The day passed. The shadows of a September afternoon gathered in gray and violet on the sea. The French boat came in, and they all watched it turn and back into the harbor, a spectacle Frances had missed in other years, owing to the claims of Cheriton Road. She was not sorry to be released from these, and enjoyed her tea at the Creamery, even though the family party lacked two of its members. For Harry did not come. She had not really expected him, as it was such a perfect day for sketching, but she would rather he had been there.

"I think I'll have a walk along the Leas and see how Daddy's getting on," she said when tea was over and the party preparing to return to the beach. "Anyone like to come with me?"

But neither Meg nor Martin was inclined to forego the last pleasures of the day, and their mother set out alone.

She was not quite sure where to look for Harry. He might be sitting high up on the promenade, where he had the widest view, or he might have settled himself in some corner of the Leas, where he would be more sheltered and more private. But it was only a few minutes after five; she could search at her leisure.

Then suddenly she saw him—almost before she had begun to look for him. She was passing an open-air tea place, a terrace with rows of little tables set out under striped sunshades. Very few people were having tea now, and the couple in the corner by the pay kiosk showed up plainly. They were Harry and Daisy Brown.

Frances stood still. She felt that if she moved another step they would see her, and her first emotion had been a curious impulse to hide herself. There they sat, laughing and talking together as they had done at the garden party. Harry's sketching things lay in a pile beside their table. He was leaning toward her, looking into her face, and she was looking at him over the rim of her lifted teacup, under the brim of her great, nodding hat.

Her wits were returning. What should she do? Go up to them and speak? What should she say? Oh, there you are. Isn't it a lovely

afternoon? . . . No . . . I'm sorry I must interrupt your tête-à-tête, but it's time to go to the station. But she couldn't say either of those things. She could not be polite to that dreadful woman, nor could she make a scene. How had Harry met her? Had she pursued him to Folkestone? She must find out; but later, later. She could not question Harry now, or on the journey home. They must be alone. Then there was nothing for her to do now but to go. She felt sick, and her legs were shaking. She would go somewhere and sit down.

Then as she moved away Harry turned his head and saw her. For a moment he stared at her, wondering no doubt, just as she had, what he should do. But before he could do anything she was out of sight, and as soon as she was out of sight she began to run. Her legs were still shaking, but she ran all the way down to the beach.

She did her best to behave as usual on the journey back to Idolsfold. For the children's sake she tried to be bright and gay, but it was not successful. Harry did not help her at all. He looked gloomy and depressed, sitting opposite her in a sort of unhappy daze, scarcely speaking even when spoken to. This could not go on. She could not bear it. She must have things out with him directly they reached Idolsfold. If an opportunity did not arise she must make it for herself—for them both.

The opportunity came quicker than she had dared expect. As soon as they were home, Nanny took the two younger children, who were tired and fractious, straight up to bed. Martin followed Joe Lardner round to the stables—she purposely screened his departure from Harry, so that he should not try to prevent it—and Diana went up to her bedroom with a registered letter which had arrived while they were out.

On any normal occasion Frances would have wanted to know who had sent Diana a registered letter, but now she scarcely thought of the matter beyond thanking goodness her daughter had gone upstairs.

"Harry," she said, "come in here."

He followed her into the sitting room and shut the door. No doubt he too wanted to "get it over." He spoke first.

"Well, Frances"—he hardly ever called her Frances, but Fan, if he did not call her "my darling," "my dear" or "my love"—"I know what you want to say to me, and there'd be no need at all

to say it if you'd behaved with ordinary politeness to my guest."

"Your guest!"

"Yes, Mrs. Brown was my guest. I met her while I was sketching on the cliff, and when I found that she was tired and had had no tea I invited her to have some with me. If you had seen me having tea with Mrs. Colenutt or Lady Mallender you would have come up at once and spoken to us, instead of standing and staring and then walking away with your nose in the air."

A more unjust description of her behavior Frances could not have imagined. She did not know which point to deny first.

"I didn't," she said weakly.

"You didn't speak to us, though you plainly saw us and we both saw you. It was most discourteous."

Frances had never expected to have the tables turned on her like this, to have Harry usurp her place on the heights of moral indignation.

"How can you!" she exclaimed. "How can you say such things? You promised me never to meet her again."

"I promised no such thing. How could I?"

"You said you wouldn't talk to her again unless you met her, and when I asked where you expected to meet her you said 'nowhere,' and now you go and meet her in Folkestone."

"I didn't arrange to meet her, but she happens to be staying in Folkestone with a friend at one of the boardinghouses—"

"That seems rather odd, considering she lives so near."

"Not odd at all, in my opinion."

"Did she know you were to be in Folkestone today?"

"She did, but our meeting was entirely accidental. How could it have been otherwise, considering that I had arranged to have tea with you at Aunt Eleanor's? Our plans were changed only at the very last moment."

This was true, but her wretchedness was hooked on to a statement further back in the conversation.

"How did she know you would be in Folkestone today?"

"I told her so at the garden party. I told her I meant to do some sea pieces."

"Oh."

This was better than having told her at some meeting she had never heard of, but it did not change what she saw as an obvious fact: that Daisy Brown had come to Folkestone in pursuit of Harry. The friend was only a pretext.



"I've told you," he continued, "that our meeting was quite accidental. She saw me sketching on the Leas and joined me. She was interested."

"I'm sure she was."

Indignation had given her voice a strange new edge. She could see the whole thing. Mrs. Brown had been hunting for him all the afternoon and had run him to earth at teatime. No wonder she was tired—if she really was tired and not only pretending.

"It's useless, I suppose," and Harry's voice might have sharpened itself on hers, "to tell you again that I appreciate interest in my work from someone who really knows and understands. I don't often get the chance of that sort of thing."

His anger, his defensiveness, were so unlike him that her anxiety enlarged itself at the expense of indignation. She spoke almost persuasively: "I'm sure you might."

"How? Where?"

"At home, in London. There must be plenty of artistic people in London."

"But we don't know them. We don't know anyone who isn't dull and ignorant and conventional like ourselves. We've got our own dreary little circle of people who don't know the first things about art—or literature or music, if it comes to that. And directly I make a move, in my own interests, toward someone at all congenial, you're rude. What good can it do me to meet artistic people in London if you insult them as you insulted Mrs. Brown?"

This was really too much.

"I didn't insult her. I only walked away because I don't want to know her. And the reason I don't want to know her isn't because she's artistic but because she's immoral."

He flushed.

"That's it—you believe all the gossip about her, all the tattle of ignorant people like the Lardners, who've built up this preposterous scandal round a woman who dares to be different from what they think a clergyman's wife ought to be. Have you ever seen sparrows mobbing a canary?"

The insult to the Lardners, so cruel, so unexpected, provoked from Frances what was probably her first attempt at repartee.

"No, but I've seen them mob a hawk."

"Oh, indeed, so that's the legend. She's a bird of prey, is she? And I suppose you think I'm her victim?"

"Yes," said Frances, sinking after her flight to the plain truth.

He tried to laugh, but something in him had changed since that earlier occasion when his laughter had provoked her. It was no longer the laugh of a man who is amused at his wife's antics, so it did not hurt her pride, but it swelled her fears to a new pitch. This was not Harry; that woman had already changed him.

"Well," he continued in a voice in which aggressiveness and defensiveness seemed curiously combined, "I'm going to teach these gossips something, and you can choose whether you come in with them or stand by me and do your part as my wife in helping a most unfortunate lady. Mrs. Brown is coming *here*—to this house. I've invited her. She's coming here next week, on Friday, to see my pictures. I want her to see everything I've done since I came. And then, when she's seen my pictures I shall give her tea. If you choose to be here and play your rightful part, I shall be glad—very glad. But if you don't it'll make no difference. She's coming just the same."

Up till then Frances had been standing, facing him across the little room with its wicker furniture and green fern-light. But now her legs failed her and she sat down.

"Harry, you can't possibly . . ."

"But I have. I've invited her and she's coming. If you hadn't been so rude I mightn't have done it, but I had to cover your discourtesy."

"Then it wasn't because you wanted her to see your pictures?"

"It was that too; I want her to see them and give me her advice, but I probably shouldn't have invited her here if you hadn't walked off like that."

"It seems odd—" Her voice was on too high a key; she choked and started again: "It seems odd, if she really saw me go away and put the construction on it that you did—" the sentence broke in the middle and she finished "One doesn't usually accept invitations to the house of a woman who doesn't want to know one."

"I don't suppose she bothers her head about what 'one usually' does or doesn't. She's interested in my work."

"But, Harry," new and frantic considerations were piling up behind her words, "you can't possibly have her come here. What will the Lardners think?"

"I don't care a damn what they think"—imagine it, Harry swearing—"and I don't suppose they'll think anything. After all she teaches their daughter in Sunday school."

"Only occasionally, I believe. She's most unreliable. Besides, that's different. It's inviting her to the house—"

"What the Mallenders can do surely the Laurelwoods may be allowed to do, even by the Lardners."

"It isn't that . . . Oh, don't you see the difference? *They* do. Mrs. Lardner said 'Gentlemen like Mr. Laurelwood—'"

She turned crimson as she stopped just in time. "Gentlemen like Mr. Laurelwood are more particular than gentlemen like Sir Charles Mallender," she finished untruthfully.

"Really you and Mrs. Lardner are insufferable, the way you gossip about everybody. Talk of being particular—I'm surprised that you should sink to her level like that."

"Mrs. Lardner," began Frances in trembling agitation, "Mrs. Lardner—" she could say no more. She was within half a word of tears.

Her distress had evidently affected him. "My dear," he began. Then suddenly they were interrupted. Diana's door opened and shut with a bang, and the next moment they heard her on the stairs, coming down in a series of jumps and thuds so unlike her usual method of progress that both parents at once realized an emergency.

"What's that?" cried Harry.

The next moment the door opened and Diana burst in, neither frightened nor injured, but with flushed face, tumbling hair and eyes dancing with excited happiness. In her hand she waved a letter.

"Father! Mother! I'm engaged—I'm engaged—I'm going to marry Bertie French."

Neither of them could speak a word, the interruption was so complete. They were like tops which are suddenly whipped in the opposite direction. Frances had a vague sensation of having heard the news before, and it was not till later that she remembered her authority was not some supernatural communication but Nanny Wheeler. At the moment her mind could only shake and spin. Then the controls she had clamped down could withstand no more, and she burst into tears.

An hour later she was in bed. For the last four or five years she had been subject to migraines, and any prolonged fatigue or sudden excitement was liable to bring one on. The present one could be accounted for by both. She had spent a long day at the seaside, and almost immediately on her return had had some news hurled at

her which though satisfactory in its essence had in its manner of communication undoubtedly been a shock.

"Really, Diana," scolded Nanny Wheeler, "you shouldn't have burst it out like that."

"I'm sorry," said Diana, "but I never thought Mother would be upset. I thought she'd be pleased."

"I *am* pleased," said Frances faintly. And she was, though she still thought Diana was too young. Apart from that, the engagement—if you could call it an engagement when the acceptance was not yet in the post—was highly satisfactory, suitable in every way. She had known the Frenches for years and she liked them. They were well off, without being vulgarly so, and everybody said the boy had a promising career ahead of him at the bar. Diana would be well married, and at the same time the engagement must inevitably be long enough to satisfy maternal doubts and fears.

But it was a shock all the same. She had had no idea that Diana and Bertie were falling in love with each other. Nothing in their public behavior had suggested it. What a sly little puss she was . . . Frances was too ill physically to do more than register the spiritual hurt of Diana's reticence. (*I used to tell my mother everything.*) But then, of course, she could not be sure he would propose till he had actually done so, and you couldn't blame a girl for holding her tongue about a man who might have no intentions. Bertie had probably been as discreet in private as in public. Certainly when he had proclaimed his love Diana had been neither slow nor sly in proclaiming it too. What a child she was, so young . . . a year younger than I was when I got engaged to Harry . . . Oh, Harry, Harry . . . What can I do about you?

But her head ached too much for her to feel quite the old pain in her heart. Nanny had given her two aspirin tablets and after a while she fell asleep. When she woke in the dark morning Harry was beside her, sleeping peacefully. A body close but a mind far away . . . was that to be their union in future? No. She was making a mountain out of a molehill. But was she? After all she had heard about that woman? Oh, why can't she leave him alone? She's got her own husband and lots of other men besides. Why does she bother about Harry? Oh, she's a cat, a beast—I could kill her. And she's coming here next Friday. I won't meet her. I shall go out somewhere; I shall take Nanny and the children. She mustn't find them here. She must find an empty house, and if he wants to arrange about tea he must tell Mrs. Lardner himself. I won't—I can't—I'd

be too ashamed . . . She was sobbing helplessly again and her head was bursting. It was hardly surprising that she felt no better the next morning.

Her migraines generally lasted three days, never less than two, and any other year she would have been miserable at the thought that some of her last precious days at Idolsfold were being wasted. But though this year she was miserable enough, it was for another reason. Idolsfold was spoiled, anyway. Her one hope was to get Harry back to London and away from Daisy Brown. She was not likely to follow him there or to write to him, and his painting was always laid aside when he went back to work, not to be taken up again till his next summer holiday.

No, she was not miserable because she had to lie in bed, with a drawn blind between her and the brightness of a September day. Indeed she was glad to have this reason for withdrawal from the life of the family and the house. Physical pain prevented the full raging of mental anxiety. Her misery was not lancinating, but dull, heavy, almost a drug.

Diana came in on tiptoe.

"Can I do anything for you, Mother dear?"

"No, thank you, darling. Nanny's bringing me some tea, that's all I want. And Diana—"

"Yes, Mother?"

"Don't tell anyone about Bertie French. We'll have to talk things over. It might be best to keep the engagement private for a while."

"Bertie's sure to want it in the *Times*."

"We'll have to see about that later, when we all meet in London. He may not be able to marry for some years and in that case—"

"But if we're engaged we can go out together and he can take me to tea at Rumpelmayer's. Oh, do let us be engaged, Mother. It keeps off other men."

"You mustn't say such things, darling. It isn't nice. And I can't discuss the matter with you now. I feel too ill."

That was another advantage of having a hammer in her head, thorns in her throat and a crab in her stomach.

"All right, Mother dear. Don't worry. We'll talk about it, you and Father and I, when you're better."

She kissed her and went out.

Half an hour passed. She drank her tea, was sick and was given a dose of bicarbonate of soda. Then she settled herself in hope of some more sleep. But there were noises in the house. Was breakfast

over so soon? Somebody, Harry, was coming upstairs. She did not want to see him now. She wished he would leave her alone. She turned her face away from the door and pretended to be asleep.

"My poor darling. Are you awake?"

He must have something important to say or he would not have disturbed her. She looked over her shoulder.

"Yes?"

"I've had a telegram from Folkestone, from Smithers. She says Aunt Eleanor's had a stroke and asks me to go there at once."

Frances sat up in bed. Her head seemed to open as she did so and shut with a snap that jarred her spine, but in her was an urge to act, to resist, to prevent . . . was there really a telegram?

Yes, he was holding it out. It had been handed in at Cheriton Road post office an hour ago. "Miss Laurelwood had a stroke please come Smithers."

"Looks as if it was serious. I've asked Lardner if he or one of the boys can drive me in to Ashford. It's too late for the Rushmonden train."

"Oh, Harry, must you really go?"

"I'm afraid I must. I'm sorry to leave you, dear, when you're so poorly, but I'm her only living relation. Nanny and Diana will look after you."

"I must come too."

"My dearest, you can't possibly. You're far too ill and it's quite unnecessary."

But it was necessary—absolutely necessary that she should go with him to protect her sparrow from the bird of prey that had Folkestone for its aerie.

"I can manage it, and you can't go without me. It would never do."

"Fan, you're talking nonsense. There's not the smallest need for you at Cheriton Road. Even if you were well I should not recommend you to come."

She succumbed—not to his argument but to a wave of nausea which forced her back on the pillow. She could not possibly travel either in the trap or in the train, and even if she reached Cheriton Road she might be so ill that she would have to lie on the sofa while he went out.

"What time will you be back?"

"This evening without fail. They won't want to put me up

there, and I've found a train that will get me to Ashford soon after six. I'll be home in time for supper."

What with one thing and another this would not give him much time to roam in the town.

"You won't take your sketching things."

"My dear, of course not."

He probably thought her mind was wandering, and patted her hand.

"Don't worry about me, darling. I'll be perfectly all right and so will you. Let me call Nanny."

"No, it's all right, I don't want her."

"Then will you go to sleep?"

"Yes."

She turned over on the pillow so that his kiss fell on her ear.

They were in a state of suspended hostilities. He had called her "Darling" and "Dear" and had kissed her as if nothing had happened, but he must know that there was still a rage of distress and opposition in her heart. Had he guessed her true reason for wanting to go with him to Folkestone? If he had not, it was humiliating, for he evidently thought her a fool. Yet he had not seemed to have the smallest suspicion. The fact was that really he was in a high good humor about it all. Things could not have happened better, Aunt Eleanor's stroke coinciding with her migraine. If she had been well she would of course have gone with him. It was just a piece of luck for him that he must go alone. Satisfaction had made him tolerant and forbearing; he had not resented her attitude as he might have done on a less auspicious occasion. Men were like that, but she had thought Harry was different . . . "No, my dear, they're all the same."

And now her poor little Diana was going to walk into the trap. She was dancing in, rather, just as she herself had danced. But she could not help her. To keep the engagement private or even to forbid it altogether would be no help, since all men are the same. Her heart went out to her daughter in a new tenderness of pity. She saw her treading a dreary, escapeless road—for all men are the same. Would disappointment come to her as quickly as it had come to her mother, the very first night? And disillusion as slowly, in the twentieth year? Impossible to tell. All she knew was that they must come. At one time she had relied on the disappointment to spare her the disillusion. A man like Harry, who brought no excite-

ment to the marriage relationship might at least be relied on to keep it safe; but now he had failed her in that also.

He had let himself be flattered into a friendship which he knew displeased her and must dishonor both her and her children. Heaven alone knew what Daisy Brown wanted out of him—he was not at all her sort, and she did not believe that the woman took any real interest in his painting. But she supposed any man was her sort, any man who admired her and liked to talk to her, as Harry so obviously did. He was her prey, and his simplicity, his readiness to swallow all her tales and regard her as the victim of local spite instead of the low and degraded creature she really was, would whet her appetite and make his loss more certain. Frances had not so far envisaged any carnal act of unfaithfulness, but she saw estrangement at home and scandal abroad unless something could be done to separate this most ill-matched pair.

Yet here again what could she do? At the moment they were both in Folkestone, potentially if not actually together. She still did not think that Harry's duties in Cheriton Road would give him much time for dalliance, still less did she believe the telegram was a fake, but she was now convinced that he would not let the opportunity go by without another meeting. He would call on her at her boardinghouse and make some further arrangement for Friday. They would perhaps have tea together. They would laugh and talk and look into each other's eyes . . .

She rolled her head on the pillow. Today was not like yesterday, or indeed like its own first hours, and bodily pain no longer drugged an anguished mind. Perhaps it was the shock of Harry's sudden departure which had reversed the old order, but at the moment it seemed as if her mental agonies had burned away her migraine. She felt better, the headache was less and the sickness had disappeared. She was still too ill, too weak, too empty, to get up, but she did not doubt she would be well tomorrow and able to go with Harry to Folkestone. He would not have two days on the loose.

Comforted by this thought she drank a little Bovril with some toast for luncheon, and slept in the afternoon. At four o'clock Nanny brought in her tea.

"How are you feeling, ma'am?"

"Oh, much better. I shall get up tomorrow."

"I'm glad this has been such a short attack. I was wondering, ma'am, if as you feel easier I shouldn't take Boy and Meg to tea



at Mrs. Colenutt's, after all. I *had* meant to send Meg with Diana, as I didn't like the idea of leaving you, but I wouldn't trust her with Boy—not in the flyaway mood she's in—and I know he'll be disappointed if he doesn't go and see the little pussies. He was chattering to me about them only this morning, and seemed so cast down when I said he might have to wait till another day."

"Oh, of course, Nanny, take him. I shall be all right."

"Are you quite sure, ma'am?"

"Yes, perfectly sure."

"I'll tell Mrs. Lardner to leave the kitchen door open, and then she'll hear if you ring your little bell. Martin will be at home, too—not that he's much good to anyone."

"I shall be quite happy with Mrs. Lardner. I should feel very sorry if you stayed at home. Give my kindest regards to Mrs. Colenutt and tell her how *very* disappointed I am not to be able to come. But she knows my migraines. Tell her I'll try and look in one day before we go."

So it was Mrs. Lardner who brought up the telegram. It came just after five: ". . . and the boy's waiting to see if there's an answer."

Telegrams always made her feel nervous. They had the same effect on Mrs. Lardner, so the two of them were in sympathy as Frances fumbled it open with a shaking hand. Who would possibly have sent a telegram? Had anything happened at home in Collingham Gardens? Or had there been an accident to Harry in Folkestone? It could not be to announce Aunt Eleanor's death, for if there were no accident, Harry himself would be home in less than two hours. Her spine shuddered with the foreboding that she saw in Mrs. Lardner's eyes.

Here it was, open and unfolded at last.

"Aunt not expected, to survive night impossible to leave will wire first thing tomorrow hope you are better love Harry."

Till that moment she had never doubted that Harry would fulfill his promise and come home by the evening train. Though she had considered the possibility of Aunt Eleanor's dying she had not imagined that it would detain him at her house. It was true that he was her only living relative, but she had never seemed to value him highly, and indeed when she felt ill had refused to see him. She would not ask for him on her deathbed; his visit to Folkestone had been only for technical reasons, to cope with doctors and lawyers and nurses. He could not possibly be necessary or even welcome in

the sickroom. It was only an excuse. He wanted to stay. And why did he want to stay? Oh, this was worse, worse than anything she had imagined. Harry had deceived her—he was lost to her—they were both lost.

She felt the tears coming and was too weak to resist them, but a burst of weeping was in Lardner circles only the natural reaction to a telegram.

"Oh, mum!" cried Mrs. Lardner "Oh, whatever's happened?" Then as Frances' sobs broke into a storm. "Oh, my poor dear," and a hand patted her shoulder.

Frances lost all control. She seized that hand, and felt its roughness; the roughness reminded her of a nurse's hand that had patted and soothed her long, long years ago, and brought the same comfort. She was a child again, sobbing, sobbing and clinging to her nurse.

The first frenzy passed, and she lay exhausted, still weeping but without commotion. Mrs. Lardner stooped and picked the telegram off the bed. Then her voice came into the silence.

"Don't be so grieved, mum . . . it's a mercy really, her being so old and ill. And Mr. Laurelwood's there. It's a pity you couldn't be there too, but it would have been too much for you."

Frances started up.

"It isn't that, it's nothing to do with her. It's that woman."

"What woman, mum?"

Mrs. Lardner looked blank, and the enormity of these confidences presented itself to Frances, but purely from the outside, as something academical, which could not alter the course of her tongue.

"That woman—Mrs. Brown. He's gone to Folkestone to be with her. The whole thing's a fake."

"You mean that the old lady hasn't been took bad?"

"I don't know. Oh, I daresay he'd never have invented that. But there's no need for him to stay. He promised to come home. She doesn't want him, she's never cared about him, and he can't be any use there now. But he's met that woman and she's made him stay. She's taking him away from me."

"Mum!"

Mrs. Lardner had relaxed her grip, but Frances seized her hand again. She held it against her cheek and her tears fell on it.

"Oh, Mrs. Lardner, help me! What can I do? He's mad about her, and she's made up her mind to have him. She followed him to Folkestone yesterday and made him give her tea. And he's asked

her here next Friday—to this house. Oh, you won't let her come? You won't let her come?"

How infinite was the relief of pouring out her anguish like this after having endured it alone for so long. Her head might have been on Nurse's shoulder; she might have been smelling that starched apron, so clean, so white. "Oh, Mrs. Lardner, it's been terrible seeing him getting more and more infatuated with her."

"Dear mum, are you certain sure? I'd never have thought a gentleman like Mr. Laurelwood—"

"Oh, they're all the same, Mrs. Lardner, they're all the same."

"But Mr. Laurelwood's so quietlike, and so good. I never saw a gentleman so good and so refined. He'd never put up for ten minutes with the likes of her."

"Oh, but he does—he has. I've begged him to give her up and he's refused."

"You don't say so, mum. It's hard to believe."

"It's true. He met her when he was out sketching and she came up and spoke to him like the brazen thing she is. Then at the garden party everyone was talking about them, the way they went on. And at Folkestone—Folkestone," she was sobbing again, "he wouldn't have tea with the children and me at the Creamery, but gave her tea at some tea place . . . I saw them."

Mrs. Lardner's tongue clucked in reproof.

"I'd heard he'd talked to her a lot at the garden party, mum. In fact I'd said, 'you mark my words, it was only about art. He's an artistic gentleman.' But asking her out to tea was bad—what young Mr. Freddy Benson did and upset them all so much."

"She must have followed him to Folkestone. He said she was staying with some friend at a boardinghouse, but that's only a part of her scheme. Oh, I don't believe Aunt Eleanor's ill at all, at least not worse than she was yesterday. She arranged all this with him while they were having tea."

"I heard she'd gone to stay in Folkestone. She's at Seabeach House."

In the midst of her turmoil Frances could not help marveling at the way Mrs. Lardner always managed to keep informed as to the doings of people she never saw.

"Has she really got a friend there?" she asked. But here omniscience failed her.

"I couldn't rightly say, mum. All I know is that she had a tur'ble set-to with Mr. Brown before she went."

"Could it have been about Mr. Laurelwood?"

"No, mum. I heard it was to do with Sir Charles Mallender."

"But you said she had quarreled with Sir Charles Mallender."

"So she has, mum, but it was on account of him she and Mr. Brown terrified each other, all the same. I had it from Ivy, Rosie's sister. She works for them and she heard them at it."

"How disgusting. Oh, Mrs. Lardner," with another burst of tears, "how can my husband speak to such a woman? And how—how can he ask me to speak to her?"

"She's not a woman I'd care to speak to myself, though of course she's gentry, and some of us have to speak to her in the common way. But it seems to me, mum, that if he's asked you to speak to her he can't have nothing really bad on his conscience."

"Oh, I'm not meaning . . . Oh, Mrs. Lardner, don't get the idea that I think he's done anything really *wicked*—not *done* anything. But he's mad about her, he's always wanting to see and talk to her. And she's turned him against me. He's angry with me, because I don't want to know her. I won't meet her. If she comes here I'll go out for the day and take all the children with me."

"Surely, mum, if you said that to Mr. Laurelwood—"

"I've said it, but he won't take any notice. I've told you that she's changed him. He says she's coming whatever I say or do."

Again Mrs. Lardner's tongue clucked gently, and there was a thoughtful look in her blue eyes.

"Oh, couldn't *you* stop her coming?" cried Frances. "Say you won't have her in the house."

"I couldn't never do that, mum, her being the wife of Mr. Cole-nutt's curate. And Mr. Laurelwood would never stand for it, not if he wouldn't listen to you, mum. But I was thinking—"

"What?"

The blue eyes seemed bright with the blue spaces of the sky outside the window, into which they gazed with the fixity of a bird's.

"I was thinking, mum, what if *you* spoke to her?"

"Oh, I—I wouldn't—I couldn't."

"But to my reckoning, mum, it's time somebody's wife did speak to her. She's had her way with the men, but their wives don't seem to have interfered. Maybe they've set about their husbands, but it's her who needs terrifying."

"I could never do it."

"I don't mean nothing coarse or vulgar, mum. After all, we know

Mr. Laurelwood hasn't done what's really bad, not like some I could name round here. It's only that he's been a bit weak, mum, if I may say so, and not able to see through her as you and I do. All you have to say is that you don't want her here on Friday. Make it quite plain and she'll never have the impudence to come."

"You mean call on her at her boardinghouse and tell her?"

"Or wait till she comes home. She's coming home on Monday, when Mr. Brown goes off on his holiday. You speak up to her and tell her to leave your husband alone. You'll be speaking for others besides yourself."

"But suppose Mr. Laurelwood found out?"

"He won't—not if you're careful. Don't you let on his telegram made you uneasy. Just be natural, and then some time when he's busy you slip out and see her. But you mustn't let him think you're jealous or suspect anything."

There was a confidence in her words which Frances thought could come only from experience. Had there been a time when she too had felt her husband being taken from her? And had she acted as she wanted Frances to act? She longed to know, but dared not ask.

"You speak as if you knew all about it," she said.

But Mrs. Lardner was not going to give herself or Jack Lardner away.

"I've known a lot in your situation, mum, or something like it, and I always say the same—have it out with the woman, not the man. The man—the gentleman in this case—often can't help himself. But she can help herself all right, and it's surprising how easy it sometimes is to scare her off. She thinks you don't know, or don't care, but when she finds you do, then she won't trouble; she'll go after someone else."

"I wish I could think that."

"You try it, mum. I don't see how it can fail to work in your particular case. She can't come to this house if you won't have her. But of course if you go off for the day with the children and then come back and grumble at Mr. Laurelwood instead of at her, you aren't helping yourself, mum."

"No, I see."

"You'll try it, mum, if you've any sense—begging your pardon, I'm sure, for saying that. And now there's the boy waiting all this time for an answer to his telegram. I'd better go down and see him. What shall I say?"

"No answer."

"And I'll let Jack know he isn't wanted at Ashford with the trap. You settle down, mum, and have a good rest, and don't worry any more. You can stop it, mark my words."

She released her hand, which Frances had unconsciously been holding all this time.

The next morning another telegram arrived.

"Aunt Eleanor passed away. Please meet 3:41 train at Ashford."

The 3:41. So he was going to spend the whole morning in Folkestone and probably would have lunch with Mrs. Brown. But she checked her tears, remembering what Mrs. Lardner had said. Her words still held their comfort—a comfort out of all proportion to their literal measure. There could not really be much comfort in the thought of having a personal fight with Daisy Brown. But she felt it nonetheless. That night she had dreamed of her old nurse, Mary Rutherford: the name came back to her in the dream. She had stood beside her bed and said, "You'll try it, mum, if you have any sense"; and she had felt the same deep comfort as when Mrs. Lardner had said the same words. It wasn't till after she had been awake for some time that she realized her nurse would never have called her "Mum."

There were more practical consolations, too. This telegram showed her plainly that the first could not have been faked. Even her distracted mind could not imagine that Harry and Mrs. Brown between them could invent Aunt Eleanor's death. Nor did she think he would dare send another telegram putting off his return. He would come. And he came.

He had the exhausted look of a man who has been up most of the night. Aunt Eleanor had died at three o'clock in the morning, without regaining consciousness. He had had a little sleep afterward, but had been obliged to get up early and interview lawyers and doctors and undertakers. The funeral had been fixed for Wednesday, and she had better see about getting some mourning sent down from London.

"Oh," she said, "I can go in with you on Monday and shop in Folkestone," and then tried not to think that he looked displeased.

"Are you sure you'll be well enough?"

"Of course, dear. My migraine's quite gone, and I can't possibly appear in public in any of the things I bought when King Edward

died. For one thing, they're much too thick and hot for this sort of weather."

Unfortunately Diana said exactly the same and insisted on accompanying her parents on Monday. This spoiled her mother's chances of watching her father, to see if he really spent his time as he had forecast. It also made it quite impossible for her to seek an interview with Daisy Brown. But she was not sorry for this. It might be difficult to achieve at a boardinghouse, and anyhow she was coming back to Copstreet this very afternoon. She might even travel with them. No, she was too experienced for that.

So Frances spent a restless, distracted day, shopping and wondering. She and Diana had lunch at Bobby's, having been given to understand that Smithers would resent their appearance at Cheriton Road. Of course that might be true. Frances was loyal to the counsel she had been given, and did not, even in bed that night, ask Harry a single question as to how he had spent his time. The whole of the Daisy Brown episode might have been forgotten.

But it was not. She was laying her plans carefully and though she had not been able to have another talk with Mrs. Lardner, her courage remained high. Harry would have to go in to Folkestone again after the funeral and this time she would not go with him. Instead she would walk into Copstreet on the pretext of looking at an old chest which she had been told was for sale at Loose Farm. This would not interest Diana, so there would be no difficulty about her going alone. Then she would walk boldly up the steps of Peartree Cottage and call on Mrs. Brown.

At one time she had hoped that Harry's preoccupations in Folkestone and the necessity of being done with them before he returned to London might make him change his plans for Friday. But soon it became obvious that this was not the case. When they had all—he and she and Diana—come back from the funeral, tired, dejected and a little bewildered by the phraseology of the burial service in connection with Aunt Eleanor, he had almost at once started sorting out his paintings, rearranging folios and poring over sketchbooks. It was in itself a harmless and natural pursuit for an amateur artist, but it had harmful and unnatural implications. He was going through all his work, sorting it out and choosing the best to show to Daisy Brown.

Still not a word had passed between them on the subject. She now felt irritated by his silence. He was taking too much for granted—taking for granted that he had got his own way and

that she would receive the disturber of her peace. Well, he would soon be disillusioned, for Mrs. Lardner had convinced her that Mrs. Brown would not come to Idolsfold if Mr. Laurelwood said all she ought and meant to say.

She felt a little nervous as she set out for Copstreet early on Thursday afternoon, choosing the field path that led her across the marshes. She had told Mrs. Lardner that she was going, but they had not been alone together long enough to be able to discuss the matter—not long enough even for Mrs. Lardner's hands to fold over her apron. She had said "Good luck to you, mum," and told her that she was pretty sure to find Mrs. Brown at home if she went early in the afternoon. But then Diana had come in, with a wire which she had just received from Hubert French, and interrupted them. The wire said "Bless you a thousand times my darling." Poor little Diana.

The day was heavy for September. Gray clouds were coming up from the southwest, and their shadows lay on the marsh, so that the dikes and channels were gleamless and the floodwaters were gray. The wind might have blown out of October, and Frances buttoned up her coat. The summer was over, she told herself, the wretched summer, the only unhappy summer she had spent at Idolsfold. She forgot now that a whole month had been happy. The shadows of the last two weeks lay over it like the shadows of the clouds over the marsh.

Her heart bumped against her side as she walked into the village, and she stifled a cowardly impulse to go first of all to see the chest at Loose Farm. She knew that she ought to go first to Mrs. Brown; then, if she was out, she would still have a chance to call again. Whatever happened she must see her, if she did not want to take her present unhappy state back with her to London. The visit to Idolsfold was nearly over—in a very few days they would be back in Collingham Gardens—but if she did not play her part the evil influence might extend beyond their return. When they were back in London there was always the post, and even the train. She had been wrong in her confidence of the safety London would provide. Was not Daisy Brown said to have gone to London with Sir Charles Mallender? No, if now at this time and in this place she was not driven away, then time and place would set no limit to the danger that she was.

Peartree Cottage was a small, ancient house set back from the road behind the orchard which had given it its name. As she walked



up the brick path Frances could not help feeling surprised to find it looking so pretty and so innocent. Certainly its outward appearance did nothing to suggest the wickedness and strangeness of those that dwelt within. There was a reassuring quality about all this which gave her courage, and courage was sustained by Ivy Boorman's perfectly natural behavior when she answered the bell. Now Frances came to think of it, there was nothing really startling in the lady from Idolsfold paying a call on the curate's wife; but somehow she had expected Ivy to show surprise, if not dismay. Instead of which she smiled and answered quite calmly: "Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Brown's at home. Will you please walk in."

Frances walked in and was still further reassured and surprised. Here was nothing to suggest watonness, but chintz curtains and a polished floor, as in any other country cottage. Ivy ushered her into the drawing room, where there was more chintz, more polish and some vases of flowers. On the walls hung several pictures of what Frances called an "artistic" nature—not what she herself would have chosen, but not including the nudes she had expected an artist's ex-model to display. It was all perfectly respectable, if a little bewildering. But of course Mrs. Brown would have to consider parishioners calling to see her husband.

Then she looked out of the window and saw a sight more in keeping with her ideas. A hammock was swung between two of the pear trees, and in it sprawled the curate's wife, wearing rather a tumbled dark skirt and red jersey and smoking a cigarette. The window was open and the hammock quite close to the house, so Frances clearly heard her say when Ivy announced the visitor: "Oh, hell, what does she want?"

"Take care," said Ivy stoutly. "She can see you plain from the drawing-room window and hear you too, I reckon."

Ivy evidently did not stand on ceremony with her mistress.

Mrs. Brown looked round and her eyes met her visitor's. Then she turned them away and slipped her feet—in very high-heeled shoes—over the edge of the hammock. She did not say anything more to Ivy, or if she did, it was in a much lower voice, for Frances, who had also looked away, heard no more till the high heels came tapping down the passage. Then she heard another sound which was the beating of her heart.

The door opened and she almost sprang to meet the enemy. It was the first time she had ever seen Mrs. Brown at close quarters. At the garden party she had been some distance away, and she had also been wearing her best dress. Now she saw nothing more

formidable than a dark-eyed, dark-haired woman, not really pretty, she told herself, wearing a draggled skirt and a jersey that was darned. It took quite an effort to picture her as a breaker of hearts, and Frances felt more equally matched than she had ever dared to hope.

"Good afternoon," they both said together.

"How kind of you to call," said Mrs. Brown, which was deceitful of her, considering what Frances had heard her say to Ivy.

"I haven't come to call in the ordinary way," she replied stiffly, "I want to talk to you about something special—about my husband."

"About Mr. Laurelwood?" Mrs. Brown's eyebrows were lifted. "Won't you sit down?"

Frances was just going to when she recollected herself.

"No thank you. I'd rather stand."

Mrs. Brown lifted her eyebrows again. She really was not at all pretty. She had no rouge on, and her face looked pinched and pale.

"Do you mind if I do?" she said. "I'm feeling rather tired. I've been turning out cupboards all the morning."

Turning out cupboards! What an occupation for an enchantress! But this time the homely note was no comfort but a new outrage. Frances' fear had turned to anger, and anger fed on the things that at first had calmed fear.

"Do what you like," she said almost jauntily. "I shan't keep you long. All I want you to understand is this: I refuse to admit you to Idolsfold tomorrow."

"Very well, then; I won't come," said Mrs. Brown, bringing the whole business to an end so suddenly that Frances could only stare at her confounded.

"But I—I," she stuttered, "I—I hope I make myself plain."

"You couldn't be plainer, believe me."

"Then," some half-apprehension of her meaning restored the calmness of anger, "I am to understand that in future you will leave my husband alone."

"If he will leave me alone, certainly."

"You're surely not suggesting that it's he who's pursued and corrupted you—"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," said Mrs. Brown wearily. "No one's pursued or corrupted anybody. I hardly know your husband at all, and I really don't see why you're making all this fuss."

"Do you deny that you've been meeting him constantly in Folkestone?"

"No, I don't deny it, if by constantly you mean twice."

"So you met him a second time?"

"Yes. On Friday he had tea with me at my boardinghouse."

"But surely," Frances pumped moral indignation into her faltering voice, "you realized that I disapprove of the friendship."

"I realized that you didn't want to meet me when you bolted that time you saw us having tea in the Dorothy Gardens. But I didn't realize you were afraid your husband would fall for me."

"I never said that. I'm not afraid. My husband would never fall—he's honor and loyalty itself. But I object to your following him about in the supposed interests of his art."

"You think I followed him to Folkestone?"

"Certainly I do."

"Well, then I can tell you I did nothing of the kind. I went on business of my own that had nothing to do with your husband. He's not a bit my sort. I've been pleasant to him because he's been pleasant to me. He offered me tea when he saw I was hot and tired, so I offered him tea when I saw he was worried and lonely. That's all that's 'passed between us,' as you would say—a few cups of tea."

"You don't deny that you've talked a lot to him about art?"

"I've given him some tips for his sketching, certainly. Why not?"

The conversation seemed to be getting out of Frances' control. She seized hold of it desperately.

"Then I have your promise not to come tomorrow."

"Certainly. I haven't the smallest wish to come. Your husband invited me to see his pictures, and as he'd been very polite and agreeable I thought I might as well call in and see what he really could do. But, if it makes you comfortable to hear it, I can assure you that I have no fell designs on him of any sort whatever. I'm sure he's an excellent husband and father, but you needn't fear that I'm going to take your property away from you, for he isn't at all the kind of man who attracts me. And now, do you mind going home and letting me finish my rest, for I really am tired."

She stood up, and so did Frances, who had sat down without meaning it or knowing it.

"Good-by."

"Good-by."

They did not shake hands, but Mrs. Brown rang the bell and Ivy Boorman showed Frances out in true afternoon-caller style.

She hurried through the orchard and down the street, forgetting all about the chest at Loose Farm. Her mind and body were in

commotion. Her cheeks and neck were scarlet and her heart thudded as wildly as when she had first come into the village. She knew that she had saved Harry from the enemy, and she also knew that she had made a complete fool of herself.

If there was one thing she had not expected to suffer from the next day it was a guilty conscience. But she found that on two scores she had to bear its reproaches. In the first place she had been forced to tell a lie about her visit to Copstreet. She had said that she had seen the chest but had found it unsuitable. She was not used to telling lies, and it made her feel very uncomfortable to have to tell this one, not only to Diana but to Harry and to Nanny Wheeler. Mrs. Lardner, the only person to whom she could have told the truth, she had not seen. She was busy nursing Granny Lardner, who had been ordered to bed by the doctor after some alarming fainting fits, and it was Emmy who laid and cleared away the meals.

The second reproach was much more serious, for it came less from her conscience than from her heart. Directly after dinner Harry began to arrange his sketches in the dining room. He stood some of them on the back of the sideboard, leaning against the wall. For others he cleared out the books—Mrs. Lardner's Sunday school prizes, with *Rizpah* and *Ben Hur*—and displayed them on the bookshelf. On every shelf and bracket he displayed a sketch, but he was too conscientious to knock tacks into the wall.

Frances had not been prepared for this and her heart smote her. The room looked like a picture gallery, and it was sad to think that no one would see the exhibition. No, not sad—it was right. She must not waver or weaken. She had done what a good wife should; she had saved him from a vamp and a harpy and she must not regret it. But it was hard to see him so interested, so pleased, so excited about his work, and to know that only disappointment lay ahead.

He seemed to take her acquiescence for granted, and she tried to work up a little strength out of resentment. But it would not do. And he had evidently counted on nothing more than acquiescence, for he had not asked her to make any arrangements about the tea. He had done that himself, as she saw when Emmy came in with the tray laid for three. There was a new plum cake and a plate of little buns.

"I'm keeping the hot scones back with the teapot," said Emmy.

"Oh, thank you very much. How's your grandmother?"

"The doctor says she'll do well enough if we keep her quiet. She's old."

Frances nodded, wondering if Emmy knew who was not coming.

There was a clock in the sitting room with a solemn tick, and Frances and Harry both sat reading while it ticked away toward four o'clock. They had the place to themselves, for though Frances had not been reduced to her own emergency tactics of taking her family out for the day, she had contrived nevertheless to get them off the premises.

Her pretext had been rather a vague invitation from the Mallenders' nurse to Nanny Wheeler to "bring your party over one day before you go." It had been easy enough to say that no other day would suit and pack them off—only Martin unwilling, for Diana obviously meant to tell Kitty Mallender about her engagement, under promise of secrecy. They would not be back till late, even if, which was unlikely, they found none of the Mallenders at home; for in that case Nanny was to take them to have tea at Mrs. Root's teashop in Rushmonden. Frances had thought it all out very carefully, because though she did not expect Mrs. Brown to come she did not want Nanny or Diana to guess that she had ever been invited. Also, with self-reproach and foreboding at her heart, she wanted the field empty of all but the actual combatants, now reduced to Harry and herself.

For he and she were still at war. She tried to harden herself with that thought as she watched him watch the clock. Every now and then he lifted his eyes from his book and gazed toward it. It struck four. What time had he asked her? Should she ask him? Should she say: What time are you expecting her, dear? Four or half-past? No, she could not bring herself to ask him that, to add it to her deceits. Yet why not? There was nothing deceitful in the question, apart from the knowledge that it masked. That was the trouble. She knew that, asked for four or half-past, the visitor would not come. The time was only to help her find out how long she had to watch him watch. How soon would he give up hope?

Emmy had brought in the tea things just before four, but four was the usual time for tea at Idolsfold, and Emmy would bring them then automatically unless told to do otherwise. But she had evidently been given very precise instructions. He would not have omitted to tell her the time. So he must be expecting Mrs. Brown at four o'clock. It was now a quarter past.

Her book lay open on her lap. She could not remember when

she had put it down. Harry was still apparently reading his, but it was a long time since he had turned over a page. Every now and then he lifted his eyes and looked at the clock. He was sitting close to the conservatory door, and the light that filtered through the ferns fell on his face and made it look haggard: he looked old—too old to be in love with a woman like Daisy Brown. Poor Harry, he was not at all her sort, she did not want him, she was quite glad not to come. Frances felt her indignation rising from an entirely new source. She was heartless, she only cared for young men or for rich men like Sir Charles Mallender. She had cared nothing for Harry except as the companion of an idle hour and the provider of a cup of tea. Angry tears were in his wife's eyes.

The clock struck the half hour and she could keep silent no longer.

"Wha—what time are you expecting Mrs. Brown?"

Some of her anger was in her voice, and he looked at her sadly. He couldn't know that it was no longer for him.

"I didn't mention any special time. I just said 'tea.'"

How like a man to leave an important detail like that unsettled. At this rate he might watch the clock till five. She could not bear it. But she must. It was part of the price that she must pay for the thing she had done. But she had done right. Why should she have to pay for it?

The clock ticked on. Harry put aside his book. He got up and went into the dining room, which looked out on the front of the house. He had gone to see if she was coming. Through the open door she could see him with his face pressed against the window like an unhappy child. Oh, Harry, Harry, I can't bear this. Why didn't I let her come? She could have come and looked at your pictures and I could have been there the whole time and seen that she behaved herself. She wouldn't have been able to flirt with you or arrange another meeting with you if I had been there. But I wouldn't meet her. I wouldn't talk to her or give her tea or listen to what she had to say about your pictures. It's my fault you're unhappy. I'm a cruel beast—oh, I wish I hadn't done it.

He had come away from the window, and was looking at his pictures now, fiddling with them, straightening them. Why didn't Emmy come in and ask if they would wait any longer? The scones would be spoiled. But no doubt Emmy knew that the guest wasn't coming—all the Lardners knew. Harry was exposed to them by his wife. Oh, my darling, forgive me.

He came back into the sitting room.

"I'll give her till five," he said in a crushed voice. "She may have thought we had tea at five. Some people do. Can you wait till then?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. How sulky he must think her—sulky and ungracious, no help to him in his unhappy hour. He was quite right, for she herself had brought him to that hour. Unable to remain passive any longer, she rose and moved toward the dining room.

"Are you going out?"

She mumbled something about wanting fresh air. Then she heard him sigh.

That sigh, so deep, so helpless, broke her down completely. She hurried into the next room to hide her tears, which were falling, falling, rolling down her cheeks. Oh, what could she do? She must do something. She couldn't let this dreadful thing that she had started go through to its bitter end.

Then suddenly her mind was made up, her will was fixed in a bright clearness. She saw what she would do. She would take Diana's bicycle and go over to Copstreet and beg Daisy Brown to come after all. She had not bicycled for the last ten years, but she would manage to get there in a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Brown, if she too had a bicycle, could be at Idolsfold only a little later than five. She would ask her to say that she had thought five was the time she was expected, and that then she had been detained at the last moment by one of her husband's parishioners. No doubt Daisy Brown would laugh at her and make her feel an even bigger fool than she had made her feel yesterday. But she would come. Frances was determined that she should come. She would beg and implore her to come, persuade, coax, bribe her to come. If she had no bicycle of her own she could ride Diana's and be alone with Harry till Frances was able to get back, or she could hire, at Frances' expense, Mr. Cobbett's trap from the inn. But she should come. No expense, no sacrifice, no humiliation should be too great to make her come.

By this time she was on Diana's bicycle, wobbling desperately along the farm lane. Once she wobbled into the ditch, and a minute later went into a rut and came down with a crash. But though bruised and shaken she was still determined, and wobbled on. It was easier on the road. The bicycle ran more smoothly and she seemed to have better control of the handle bars. At Boldshaves

she was going quite fast. There was that little hill beyond the throws . . . she would have to dismount, and if she dismounted would she ever be able to mount again? No, she must not dismount, she must pedal up that hill if it burst her heart. Her face was crimson and her hands were stuck with sweat to the handle bars as she rode into Copstreet at five minutes to five.

It was not till she had actually rung the bell at Peartree Cottage that she realized she was not wearing a hat. What would Mrs. Brown think? It did not matter. Mrs. Brown would think she was a fool and laugh at her, hat or no hat. And that did not matter either.

Ivy opened the door.

"Can I see Mrs. Brown?"

"Sorry, mum. She's out."

"Out!"

For some reason Frances had never imagined the curate's wife would be out, and she was utterly taken aback by this unforeseen development.

"When—when will she be home?" she faltered.

"I don't know, mum. She didn't say."

"Do you think that if I waited she might come back in a few minutes?"

"No, mum, for she told me not wait up if she was late—just leave her supper on the table and go to bed."

"Oh."

There was nothing more to be said or done, but Frances still hovered on the doorstep. Then she noticed that Ivy was staring at her, doubtless in surprise at her disheveled and hatless condition. She muttered something incomprehensible even to herself, and turned away. Now she would have to bicycle all the way back to Idolsfold.

As she rode up to the house—not so unsteadily, for she now had the experience of four miles—she saw Harry standing in the doorway of the new part.

"Fan!" he cried. "What's happened? Where have you been?"

For a moment she was too breathless to speak.

"The tea's been on the table a quarter of an hour. I didn't know you were out, and on Diana's bicycle. Where *have* you been?"

"To Copstreet," she panted.

"Why, on earth?"

"To fetch her."



"Fetch who? Not Mrs. Brown?"

She nodded mutely. Her breathlessness was merciful in that it gave her time to think.

"You saw her?"

"No, she was out."

They were in the sitting room now, with the little wicker tea table between them. Frances poured herself out a cup of tea with a hand that still seemed to be shaking on the handle bars. Harry said slowly: "She must have forgotten."

Frances said nothing. Then she noticed that she had not given him any tea, and poured out another cup.

"Darling," he asked a minute later, "what made you go?"

She could speak the truth at last.

"I-I didn't want you to be disappointed."

He looked at her with eyes in which there seemed suddenly to be tears.

"So you went to see why she hadn't come?"

She nodded the lie she was ashamed to speak. He repeated: "She must have forgotten." For a few moments there was silence between them.

At last he rose, pushed back his chair, and came round the table toward her. "My sweet, darling wife."

"Oh, Harry . . ."

But he had taken her in his arms.

"My precious one," trying to kiss her hidden face, "you are the kindest most generous wife a man could have."

She could only repeat: "I-I didn't want you to be disappointed."

Her tears were falling—falling down his cheek as he held it against hers. She longed to rush away from him, to sob out her shame and contrition away from the sting of his dreadful praise. But she could not hurt him more than he had been hurt already.

"You're too good to me, my dear. I'm afraid I've been rather difficult of late, spoken sharply to you . . . But you do forgive me, don't you?"

She could only weep, and he said again: "You do forgive me?"

"If—if you'll forgive me."

"I've nothing to forgive you for. I see now that I was tactless and stupid. No wonder you were upset."

"Oh, Harry, Harry . . ."

She broke off. She must not say any more. If he really knew what he had to forgive, he could never do it.

"I expect I bored her," he said after a few moments. "Come, cheer up. Let's have our tea and forget about all this. And please, darling, don't let's ever talk of it again."

But he did not take his arms away. She wished he would. The longer he held her the deeper the roots of her penitence seemed to go, stabbing down beneath this episode of Daisy Brown, right down through all the faults and fusses of family life with which she had surrounded him, right down to the bitter soil of that first married night at Idolsfold, where all his present disappointment seemed to lie in the first failure of her love.

It was not for some days, not till the very eve of the Laurelwoods' departure from Kent, that she had another talk with Mrs. Lardner. This was not due entirely to the claims of Granny, but also to one or two deliberate evasions on Frances' part. She knew that Mrs. Lardner would want to talk about Mrs. Brown, and the subject was now utterly distasteful to her. However, she knew that sooner or later it would have to be discussed. She could not permanently avoid Mrs. Lardner, so on the last evening of all she let herself be found alone in the dining room after supper, instead of bolting out with the others, as had lately been her practice.

Mrs. Lardner came in and set down her tray.

"Well, mum, this is a sad evening for us all."

The conversation was evidently going at least to start on traditional lines.

"Very sad indeed," said Frances, and then realized that it was not sad at all. For the first time she would be glad to leave Idolsfold.

"I'm sure these summer visits are always happy times for us, and I hope they are to you too, mum."

"Indeed, they are."

"And directly you go we always start looking forward to when you come back again."

"How nice of you to say that. I do hope your mother-in-law will get through the winter comfortably."

"Oh, Granny's doing nicely now. She had old Mr. Morris to see her yesterday. We thought it no harm for him to sit with her in her bedroom, they being both over eighty."

"Of course not, no harm at all."

"Have you heard about Mrs. Brown, mum?"

Frances jumped. She had not expected the subject to be introduced so suddenly, and it was not till later that she saw the association of ideas.

"No. What about her?"

"She's gone back to Sir Charles."

"Sir Charles Mallender?"

"That's the one," said Mrs. Lardner, accepting a choice of Sir Charleses.

"Oh."

"She knows when she's well off, I reckon."

"I daresay she does."

"There she was, trying her hand with all and sundry after their quarrel. But it didn't work, and now she's made it up with him."

Frances said nothing. She felt embarrassed and irritated. There stood Mrs. Lardner, her work-worn hands folded over her starched apron, her blue eyes alight with the light of gossip; but somehow the magic had gone out of her. What had happened? Was it because she knew too much about herself and Harry? Or was it because once they had met as sister women instead of as Mrs. Lardner and Mrs. Laurelwood? Frances did not know. All she knew was that she did not want to talk to Mrs. Lardner any more—or ever again.

"Ivy said she was out with him Friday and Saturday," continued the soft, monotonous voice, "and now she's gone to Brighton, and he's gone too. So we draw our own conclusions. Ivy doesn't fancy being alone at the place, and she comes home to her mother every night. But Mr. Brown's due home at the end of the week, and I reckon she'll be home too by then."

"I daresay she will."

"Speaking personally, mum, I can't say I'm sorry. It's better than having her loose on the rampage. Gentlemen like Sir Charles are all very well, but when it comes to gentlemen like Mr. Laurelwood—"

"That will do," said Frances angrily.

It was the first time she had ever spoken like that to Mrs. Lardner and they both flushed.

"I—I'm sorry," continued Frances, stammering a little, "but I don't want that subject ever mentioned again. I'm sure I can rely on you to keep it to yourself."

"Oh, yes, mum, certainly."

Mrs. Lardner's hands were no longer folded over her apron. She was collecting the supper things off the table and putting them on the tray. Frances tried desperately to think of another subject to restart the conversation, but none would come. The only thought in her was, it's finished. I must never see her again. After a time Mrs. Lardner said: "I believe Mrs. Colenutt's thinking of sending

Miss Maudie to a new school. There's a lady come to Eastweasel who gives lessons, I'm told."

Frances snatched at the straw, and out of it made enough talk to last them till Mrs. Lardner had cleared the table and gone safely out of the room.

The cocks, crying from farms near and far away, wove their accustomed pattern into her dreams as she woke on the last morning. She should have woken to sadness, reluctance, regret, instead of which she woke with a curious lightness of heart. There under the window stood her trunk, ready packed but still open, waiting for those last few things that could not be put in till this morning. Round her the familiar furniture grew every minute clearer in the waxing light. Tomorrow she would open her eyes on another room, a larger, grander room; it would all be different. She raised herself on her elbow and looked round.

On other years she had looked round thinking, "When shall I see you again?" This year she thought "How pleased I shall be if I never do." Perhaps next summer she might be in Scotland instead of at Idolsfold. She knew that Diana would want to go quite naturally and rightly. It might be a good thing for them all to go, to get on holiday terms with the Frenches; and it might be possible to find lodgings that were not too dear, or they might take a house with Mrs. French and share expenses. She did not think Harry would object even if it cost a little more. Had not he told Diana that he would like to go to Switzerland? Besides, he too had his reasons for not wanting to come back to Idolsfold.

She sank back on the pillow as Emmy's footsteps approached the door. Tomorrow it would be Maude who brought in the hot water and drew up the blind. Tomorrow's hot water would not smell of smoke and the can would be much larger. For the first time Frances thought of these changes as improvements.

Harry got up and began shaving. Tomorrow he would be in his own dressing room, another definite change for the better. He too seemed cheerful this morning. For the last few days he had been depressed. Her remorse had borne the weight of his silence and listlessness. But now he was talking while he shaved, he even made a joke or two. In a sudden fierceness she thought to herself, We mustn't come back. He must never see that woman again. And I must never see Mrs. Lardner.

The Laurelwoods always left immediately after breakfast. The

eccentricities of the darling little train gave them no choice between arriving home in time for lunch or too late for dinner. For this reason the last breakfast was almost a ceremonial meal. Everyone ate two eggs as a last experience of country freshness and abundance, and there was always a dish of whipped cream to spread with the jam. Frances had devised throughout the years a ritual of cheerfulness to meet the occasion. Spirits were so low and prospects so drear that it had become her custom to enlarge on the approaching delights of the autumn and winter. Last year it had been to Martin: How you will enjoy going to Marlborough! To Meg: How you will enjoy your dancing class! To Diana: What a wonderful time you will have when you come out!

This year the joyance was less forced but also less needful. Martin was in sulks so deep that no charm of hers could reach him, while Diana was openly in uproarious spirits and eager to be gone. The darling little train would be racing to London another, more imposing and no less dear, which had left the Highlands the night before. Hubert French had announced his intention of coming back to town ahead of his family, so as to be there as soon as she was. There was even a chance that he might arrive in time to meet her at Charing Cross.

Only Meg needed cheering, for Boy's contentment was easily secured within the passing moment. She also needed restraining.

"Mummy, I never saw Mr. Morris' dog this year. Do you think there would be time for me to go over to Shadoxhurst before we leave? . . . Mummy, do you think Bess would sell me back the watch I bought for her in Folkestone? . . . Mummy, next year I'm going to put Veronique into short clothes. I think I shall like her then . . . Mummy, next year may I have a bicycle?"

With Meg it was almost a ritual act to shed tears on departure, and this year Frances was not sorry that there should be at least one substantial token of grief to balance the cheerfulness which the three older members of the family found hard to conceal. The Lardners, with suitably long faces, assembled on the doorstep.

"Good-by, sir; Good-by, mum. It's sad to see you go."

"It's sad to be going. Thank you all so much."

"See you next year."

"Oh, yes . . . of course."

"Good-by, Lardner, and good luck."

"Good-by, sir—till next year."

"Good-by, Mrs. Lardner."

"Good-by, mum. See you next year."

"Good-by, Emmy."

"Good-by, Miss Diana."

"Good-by, Bess."

"Good-by. I bought another animal watch yesterday at the post office."

"Oh, Mummy . . ."

"Hush, dear."

They were all in the wagonette, with Joe Lardner on the box. Frances preferred Dick as a driver—he was more careful—but now it was some time since he had driven them, and today she noticed that he was not in the family group on the doorstep, a group which included even Granny Lardner, who had insisted on coming downstairs for the farewell ceremony.

"Where's Dick?" she asked.

"He's poorly, mum, got a bad headache, so he's stopping in bed."

"I'm sorry, very sorry. I hope he'll be better soon."

"Say good-by to him from me," said Diana.

"Thank you, Miss—I will."

The wagonette moved off, handkerchiefs fluttered, hands waved.

"Good-by—Good-by" . . . "See you again next year" . . . "Thank you all so much" . . . "Good-by, good-by till next year."

They were at the bottom of the hill. Above them Idolsfold lay like a street of red and black houses against the September gold of Boldshaves Wood. The group in the doorway could still be seen and their voices came down the hill after the rumble of the wheels.

"Good-by . . . Good-by till next year."

Halfway to the main road Frances seemed still to hear the voices: "Next year . . . next year." But it was only an echo in her own mind—the ghost of old familiar words now dead.

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